

SOUTHLAND TALES



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THE COMPLETE SAGA

A NOVEL BY:

RICHARD KELLY

&

T/JAMES REAGAN

SOUTHLAND TALES

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Opening Quote: Compliments of Konami Computer Entertainment  
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Films Also Available by Richard Kelly:

*Donnie Darko*

*Southland Tales*

*The Box*

Novels Also Available by T/James Reagan:

*Famous For Nothing*

*Empire Waste*

*Leeds House*

*Lovetrust*

*Beach House Burning*

*Neon Blacktop*

*Hot Blonde Girls With Heavy Eye Makeup*

*Miss Julie 2020*

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**DARKO**  
ENTERTAINMENT

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## SOUTHLAND TALES

*Dear Reader,*

I've adapted Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* into a novel. This feels like the next step. Richard shot the film, and wrote a prequel narrative in graphic novel form, then the comics were adapted into a prequel screenplay, which I took and added to the original Cannes cut of *Southland Tales*, resulting in this novel. If you're already confused, turn back now.

The manuscript you're about to read is the entire *Southland* saga.

This novel is 100% free. If you paid money for it, someone ripped you off. If you'd like to support me, my novels are available on Amazon, [here](#).

If you're a publisher who wants to publish some of my unreleased novels, my two most recent manuscripts are a fiction novel about the 2016 election, and a fiction novel about the contemporary tube-site era porn industry. I also have a twelve episode sci-fi TV series fully written.

If you're a filmmaker who would like their too-big-for-the-theater vision novelized, I'm your man. If you're Kevin Smith, this is me formally asking if I can adapt *Hit Somebody* as my next project.

If you're some dickhead lawyer who's going to try to sue me over this novel that I'm making absolutely no cash on, go ahead, I dare you. I live in Newark. What do you expect to win from me in court? My *Southland Tales* Blu-Ray that I bought from Blockbuster a decade ago? Just like teen horniness, my adaptation of Richard's work isn't a crime.

If you're one of the nine thousand streaming services desperate for TV show ideas, I think this novel could *easily* be adapted into a great season of television, and I think Richard Kelly is the director who could do it for you. The world needs more Richard Kelly in it. It's time for his return.

This novelization was a labor of love, and it addresses all of the penetrating issues facing society today- issues like abortion, terrorism, crime, poverty, social reform, quantum teleportation, teen horniness, and war. I hope it makes you laugh, and makes you think.

This is the way the saga ends, not with a director's cut, but with a novel.

XOXO

T/JAMES REAGAN

SOUTHLAND TALES

*"WHO AM I REALLY?"*

"NO ONE QUITE KNOWS WHO OR WHAT THEY ARE. THE MEMORIES YOU HAVE AND THE ROLE YOU WERE ASSIGNED ARE BURDENS YOU HAVE TO CARRY. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF THEY'RE REAL OR NOT- THAT'S NEVER THE POINT. THERE'S NO SUCH THING IN THE WORLD AS ABSOLUTE REALITY. MOST OF WHAT THEY CALL REAL IS ACTUALLY FICTION. WHAT YOU THINK YOU SEE IS ONLY AS REAL AS YOUR BRAIN TELLS YOU IT IS."

*"THEN WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO BELIEVE IN? WHAT AM I GOING TO LEAVE BEHIND WHEN I'M THROUGH?"*

"WE CAN TELL OTHER PEOPLE ABOUT HAVING FAITH- WHAT WE HAD FAITH IN- WHAT WE FOUND IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO FIGHT FOR. IT'S NOT WHETHER YOU WERE RIGHT OR WRONG, BUT HOW MUCH FAITH YOU WERE WILLING TO HAVE... THAT DECIDES THE FUTURE."

*-M.G.S.-  
2001*

## SOUTHLAND TALES



NULLA-

## SCREENING.

*"Everything is dark, and the air has an electricity to it.*

*You might be with someone you love, or maybe you've just met the person next to you, but either way, there are expectations.*

*A blast of light suddenly shatters the calm, then an eardrum-rattling rumble seems to vibrate the walls. The first bits of information are fed to you, and pretty early on, you get a feeling about what the future holds.*

*This is how it starts.*

*This is why, in 2008, we still go to the movies- for this experience.*

*What we're about to watch on this laptop screen right here, to the left of my high powered rifle, is how the world ends.*

*I know it's not polite to talk during a film, but this is a special situation. You and I will have a conversation because, you're right, we do need each other. At first, when you recognized me, and climbed up here to ask me for an autograph, I wanted to shoot you, but now that you're here, and this screen is showing us how it all unfolds, I need you next to me.*

*We can take breaks. We don't have to spend every minute binge-watching this screen. I'm sure at some point we'll go down to the Mariasol and get a beer, but no matter what, we'll return here, and you'll sit with me, and you'll pay attention.*

*I already know what we're going to see, but that doesn't make me feel very good. It's not a nice feeling, knowing.*

*Imagine walking into your local multiplex to watch the first showing of a film you've been anticipating for years, then once the lights go down and the screen begins to flicker, what you're presented with is, frame-for-frame, word-for-word, something you've already seen.*

*That's how I feel right now; I'm repeat-viewing life as it happens.*

*Since you were so anxious to meet me, I'll give you the connection you were searching for. You're going to sit with me, on this turret, and we'll watch a movie unfold. I need you to do this, because, together, we must change the ending. We're going to find a way to save the world, as we watch the story of Boxer Santaros and his journey down the road not taken."*

[illegible]

I-

## TWO ROADS DIVERGE - JUNE 29<sup>TH</sup> 2008

This is how our vacation begins- climbing onto the roof of a tourist-trap restaurant to meet a heavily armed celebrity.

Before this TV star sighting, we had been in LA for almost a full day, and even after an entire TMZ tour, we had yet to find a single famous person. In a last-ditch effort to witness someone who regularly appears on TV, the fat woman who sat next to us on the tour bus asked our guide, "Can we at least see Harvey Levin?" This question was posed merely so this lady could brag to her friends about her brush-with-fame moment when she returned to whatever godforsaken Midwestern town she calls home.

The TMZ tour guide expertly herded us off the bus, and redirected the conversation to the Grauman's Chinese Theatre's latest set of handprints from "none other than Mr. Big Willie Style himself, Will Smith."

Staring down at Hollywood's history literally cemented in the ground, we walked over to Will Smith's handprints, and in the center of the rosy-brown concrete slab that he was given, we noticed that Will had written "Change the World" which seemed cliché, until we remembered that Will Smith saved the Earth from aliens on July 4<sup>th</sup> in *Independence Day*, and our excess patriotism stemming from the awful July 4<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in Abilene and El Paso caused us to fall to our knees and put our hands inside Will Smith's handprints. *This motherfucker punched an alien in the face... for America*, was what we thought as Will's palm pressed against our own.

The tour reached an anticlimactic end which consisted of generic souvenir shopping, so we drifted toward Hollywood and Vine, where we caught the first of two buses required to reach the Santa Monica Pier Beach. We did this on a whim- we had a rental car parked in a lot by a music school- but when that bus pulled up, we got on. Maybe we just wanted to make a friend in California, and we knew we couldn't do it with the windows rolled up in the rental.

When researching destinations for our trip, we had found a picture of the Santa Monica Pier Beach from... well, we aren't sure the exact date, but the photograph was in black and white so it was either from a long time ago

or was taken by a UCLA art student who saw the black and white aesthetic as cruise control for “classy photography.” In the photograph, there were all of these black umbrellas opened on the beach. Something about the image of even a single black umbrella seemed so bizarre to us, and in this picture, *everyone* on the beach had one. This distilled the LA experience for us- an illogical choice, unquestioningly co-opted by all.

After we completed a confusing transfer that no one was willing to help us understand, we rode the second bus to our intended destination, and we began to feel a certain loneliness that we were about to walk the beach without someone to hold hands with.

When we reached the beach, there wasn't a single black umbrella in sight, which made us consider that the picture might have been an artificial construct. We should have expected that from a place like this.

As we glanced out toward the end of the Santa Monica pier, we spotted the Mariasol restaurant, where atop its yellow roof was a distinctly post-July 4<sup>th</sup> image of a camo-clad soldier on a gun turret, pointing his high-powered rifle at the beach. This was something that, before Abilene, would've been terrifying, but after Abilene, it's merely a commonplace comfort.

*Abilene*- that name was stuck in our brain as we made our way down the pier, toward the restaurant, and as we were climbing the stairs to enter the Mariasol, we realized why. The man sitting on the turret, behind that rifle, was Pilot Abilene. This poster boy was strategically located in the one place that seeing a celebrity would be a thrill, and seeing a high-powered rifle would be a chilling reminder of where we are as a country. This was our celebrity sighting, and it should have been enough, but we needed more. We realized that if we were to look Pilot in his injured eye, it would be an LA experience we could recount for a lifetime. We knew we wouldn't wince at the sight of him, or get thrown off by his disfigurement- that scar encircling his eye, with its tail slicing down to his lip. The scar vaguely resembles a question mark, but there's no question as to how it happened- the story has been recounted in every profile done on Pilot, and there have been many. The look of the injury isn't that severe anymore, because like everyone else in this state, Pilot had a plastic surgeon do enough work that his injuries aren't jarring to look at, as long as we don't think about the military-industrial complex that saw Pilot Abilene as a recruiting tool for their ugly war.

Our bus trip to the pier felt like destiny- we had found him- a hero and a legend- and best of all, no one was around him.

We walked through the Mariasol, with its skinny perimeter windows, and rows of tightly packed tables.

We exited the restaurant from a side-door and stepped onto an elevated platform which connected the Mariasol to a recently repurposed building used to launch boats carrying supplies and workers out to the Tidal Generator. Out on this raised platform, we turned a trash can upside-down, then stepped on it, and this was enough to allow us to grab onto the edge of an outcrop in the building that wasn't covered by the blinding yellow roof.

We hoisted ourselves up, and began practicing what we'd say, Private Abilene, *Thank you for your service-* no. *Pilot, we miss seeing you on TV-* no. *Mr. Abilene, so sorry for intruding-* yes. That was the one, we decided. We wanted to apologize to him.

All of this preparation was for naught though, because atop the Mariasol, we found ourselves unable to speak, while face-to-face with one of our favorite actors, and the barrel of his massive rifle. He winked his scarred eye at us, then offered a four-word introduction:

*"Bang."*

"No! Please no," we gasped, ducking, but in his smooth sweet Southern accent, Pilot assured us:

*"Stand up. I'm just messin' with ya."*

We did as he requested, and we waited for further instructions, but Pilot seemed to notice something on the screen of the laptop attached to his turret, and he became completely distracted- like we weren't even there.

The fact remained, we were there, and we currently are still there so, yes, at this very moment, we're on the roof of the Mariasol, staring at Pilot Abilene, and just behind him is the massive four-legged Tidal Generator, anchored in the Pacific Ocean.

This is the way our vacation begins; first with a "bang," then with silence.

We've spent so many days staring at a screen, focused on Pilot, that we don't feel awkward about staring at Pilot, as he remains transfixed with what's on his screen. We can't see what he's watching, but we do notice that the back of the laptop has a circular black and white sticker on it, and the logo on the sticker has two rifles crossed over each other. Instead of the rifles forming an X, they form a cross, like a crucifix, and we have to

wonder if all injured soldiers receive such a sticker in exchange for their sacrifice.

Without looking at us, Pilot issues a demand that barely sounds like a word:

“C'mon.”

He pats the open seat on the turret, and instead of asking if this is a trick, we follow his order.

“Sit.”

Our nerves buzzing, our fingertips tingling, we sit next to Pilot on the turret.

“Watch this.”

We again follow the order we're given, and we look at the screen of the laptop.

Pilot taps the screen, and our eyes follow his finger.

At first, we misinterpret what we're seeing as B-roll of David Lynch's *Dune*.

A sandstorm in the middle of the desert begins to cover a body. There's something familiar about this figure, this massive man. We can only see half of his face, but we're almost certain it's Boxer Santaros. Since all of Boxer's movies deal with some form of disaster- natural or otherwise- it's a safe bet that it's Boxer in the sand.

“What's the name of this movie?” we ask.

“Life.”

This explains the lack of opening credits, and the fact that Boxer remains in the fetal position for two full minutes of screen time, but it raises numerous other questions that we aren't sure we're allowed to ask.

We pay attention to the laptop screen, hoping that it will provide some answers, but the footage has no cuts. We watch the sandstorm whip, and it's only when the sand-level surpasses Boxer's nose that his eyes open, and he sits up.

Dunes below, sand in the wind, smoke in the sky- Boxer looks up, seemingly questioning, *Is this a war zone, or just Texas?* Which he probably followed up with the question, *Is there a difference between the two anymore?*

Boxer gets to his feet, the sand swirling around him, and he searches for a landmark. Anytime we've seen a movie with a character in the desert, they're always in trouble- like that scene from *Casino*- De Niro, in those

huge sunglasses, watching Pesci kick up dust in a fast-approaching drive across the sand. In a voice-over, De Niro presumes that he'll be shot and buried in the desert, and in this situation, he had an advantage compared to Boxer- at least the weather was nice in the De Niro scene.

Boxer looks down at his feet, and there sits two nearly-buried items- what looks like a small metal case, and what might be a backpack. He blinks sand out of his eyes, then reaches down and picks up the metal box. After pressing his thumb on the print-reader, Boxer is able to get the case opened. It appears that sitting atop a smooth red velvet interior is something that looks like a mix between a handgun and a syringe. Boxer grabs the LED adorned syringe- its chrome glinting, its red liquid nearly glowing- then he hungrily plunges the needle into his neck. We wince, as Boxer's eyes go wide despite the swirling sandstorm, then he drops to his knees.

We aren't sure if this is an act of suicide, or a desperate attempt by Boxer to sustain himself further in the unforgiving desert as he waits for help. All we can think about is our friend, Brendan, who came back from Fallujah with shrapnel in his legs, and how he has an addiction to shooting Liquid Karma into his veins. Brendan would go to great lengths to get his hands on Liquid Karma, and to this day he can't stop talking about what a transcendent experience it is. He would ramble on-and-on about how Liquid Karma expands one's consciousness, and provides the spiritual euphoria akin to soaring with eagles. He also said the same shit about mushrooms too so we mostly just ignore his drug reviews.

We're jolted by Pilot, who reprimands us:

*"Hey, pay attention. Watch the screen. I need your help. The, uh, the thing of it is... we need to find out how to stop the end of the world and it's not going to happen with you looking out toward the beach."*

"Um, the end of the world?" we ask, hoping we heard Pilot wrong. We begin to scan the beach, then we look to the gun on the turret.

*"Don't worry- everything that's happening out there on the beach is fine. I haven't even shot this rifle before. I'm mostly stationed up here as window dressing."*

*What we need to focus on isn't out there, it's right here, on this laptop screen. Ya see Boxer lying there in the sand? I know he looks like he won't be getting up- like*

*he'll be buried in the desert- but he'll be fine. I know this, because I've seen this happen before- not just Boxer doing Liquid Karma out by Lake Mead, but all of this. So here's what I propose, I'll help you understand what's happening here, but if you disagree with me, please, challenge me. I need your observations so we can fix this. We can't let everything play out like I know it does. The country depends on us changing... something. I need you to help me understand what that 'something' might be. I know you came up here to get an autograph or a picture with me, but sometimes life asks for more. I came to LA to be a TV star, and ended up on a turret; you came to LA to meet a movie star, and now you're on a turret too.*

*I need you, and I can see you asking yourself if it had to be you, and truthfully, it didn't. You just happened to come to me, so I'm using it to my advantage.”*

We don't know how to react to this moment. We did want something from Pilot, and now he needs something from us, so there's an awkward balance being struck here. Carefully, we ask, “What if we don't find out what needs to be changed?”

*“Maybe you don't have to. There's this process that I want to try out. I learned about it back in Iraq. I was speaking with someone who worked on the USIDent project when they first got authorization for it under The Patriot Act. He was a programmer, and he said that his team was one of the major players in developing the back-end for the system that's beaming us this feed. Due to the high likelihood of another attack after El Paso and Abilene, this guy's code was written on a strict timeline. His guys had to deliver on the project ASAP. My programmer friend said that there were so many bugs with the surveillance systems- cameras only working on a stationary rotation, cameras not getting IPs, cameras straight up not receiving a signal- so to troubleshoot this, one of the techniques one of his guys would use to check if their code was broken or the access lists were fucked up, was they would explain aloud what the code was*



*supposed to do, to a rubber duck on their desk. That stupid little duck would sit there, and it would stare at the programmer as he went through the code, line-by-line, and the idea was that by having to explain what each piece of the code meant, the programmer would notice what was broken when he couldn't explain it away. So, I guess what I'm asking is... will you be my rubber duck?"*

We nod, and quietly confirm, "Yes."

*"Thank you. Oh, and in that case, you're gonna need this."*

Pilot reaches into the pocket of his olive green army pants, then takes out an orange bottle of suntan lotion. He gives it to us, and even though we put on some suntan lotion for the TMZ tour, we know this direct sunlight is going to be a problem, so we apply a second coat.

Once we smell like a piña colada, we hand Pilot back his lotion, and we make good on our promise, by focusing on the laptop screen.

Boxer, for the second time since we've arrived, rises from the sand like a buried relic being hoisted by a crane. As the sand pours off Boxer's massive frame, it fills the open pockets of his khaki cargo shorts.

At first, it was difficult to gauge just how imposing Boxer Santaros is, but as he removes his green hoodie and T-shirt, to shake out the sand, it becomes obvious that Boxer isn't being CGI'd in his movies- he really is that big, that defined, that cut.

Once he puts his shirt and hoodie back on, Boxer digs up the backpack at his feet, then straps it to his back. He chooses to leave the metal case and the syringe behind. That needle could be worth good money if someone were to sell it to TMZ so it's better that it remains out in the middle of nowhere.

We try to read the expression on Boxer's face, and his bewilderment betrays a cool he's effortlessly flaunted in so many summer blockbusters of the past. We're immediately keyed into Boxer's dilemma, because he's not a stranger- he's a familiar man in a strange situation- and that's not so foreign to us anymore.

Seemingly ready to begin his trek out of the desert, Boxer braces against the sand-salted wind and looks into the horizon. Deciding on a direction, he begins to walk, and in a chilling twist, the feed follows him. At first, we're unsure of how this is occurring, but then we look to the right of Pilot's

screen, and we see that the sight on his rifle is surrounded by a little blue ring, confirming, yes, it's recording everything. This means that someone has the sight of their rifle trained on one of the biggest movie stars in the world, as he does drugs and wanders around the desert like Hunter S. Thompson with a marginally better receding hairline.

"Who's watching Boxer?" we ask Pilot.

*"We are."*

Boxer stops walking and as the frame expands, we see that he's at a fork in the road.

*"Two roads diverged in a desert-storm, and Boxer  
Santaros could not travel both, so long he stood, and  
looked down one, as far as he could."*

"What the fuck was that? Did you just deliver a soliloquy?" we ask Pilot, who smirks, but doesn't take his eyes away from the screen.

We peel back this new comfort and remember that Pilot Abilene is next to us, and he asked us for a favor, so we pay attention to what the screen is showing us, instead of over-analyzing what we hope isn't a slam poetry habit Pilot has acquired.

Finally making a decision, Boxer flips up his hood and braces against the punishing sandstorm. He chooses the path to the right that bends into the undergrowth.

From the rifle sight, we follow Boxer for a very long time, and we begin to wonder how our California vacation turned into this.

Boxer becomes smaller and blurrier in the frame as even the zoom on the rifle sight can't keep up with the trek. Before Boxer disappears from the screen, the feed abruptly switches. No longer are we watching Boxer Santaros; Now, on Pilot's laptop screen, we're in a first-person view, following behind a US Army soldier who's wearing a gas mask.

*"That's supposed to happen. The feed is supposed to  
jump. They control what we need to see. All of this is  
supposed to happen, all of this is supposed to be seen."*

"Why does this need to be seen?" we ask.

*"Because we need to protect America. Land of the free,  
home of the saved video files of every moment of your life  
so you can never escape your past."*

We hear, “How long is this storm supposed to last?” crackle over the feed, and the soldier on screen looks back toward the camera, then says, “Doesn't matter. Just keep on keepin' on.”

Not only do we have video, but we also have access to the audio feeds from the mics they have in their gas masks. The soldiers become the subject of this surveillance-state film that Pilot is screening, and we presume that were being beamed this information from the USIDent servers.

We thought that the US avoids filming their soldiers because if any injustices are committed, the Neo-Marxist Underground will totally freak out. Once the left began their campaign of total equality at any cost, the infighting on their side became so severe that now two groups- the classic Democratic party, as well as the Neo-Marxists- will get bitchy at a perceived act of impropriety so this filming-ban was logical on the current administration's part.

We briefly had considered that this is a Neo-Marxist feed that Pilot was getting via the alter-net USIDeath, but none of the Neo-Marxists have made a shoehorned and awkward cameo yet, so we know they aren't filming this. No Neo-Marxist could stay off camera for this long. In the end, it doesn't matter who's showing us this- what matters is they're showing us what leads to the end of the world, and it's up to us to alter the narrative, and avoid the ending.

The soldier on the screen pauses for a moment, then asks, “Any sign of him?”

The frame pans left, then right, in quick succession, and we're now certain that we're watching footage from a helmet-cam. Along with the physical “no,” our cameraman says, “He must have wandered outside of the perimeter. This is a restricted area.”

“So radio the general and get authorization to enter the restricted area,” the soldier on-screen says, as he resumes walking.

“Command, can you get me General MacArthur?” we hear our cameraman request, and we realize that we're not the only ones listening in on the feed.

“For what purpose, over,” we hear crackle on the feed.

“This is private Aldrich, requesting authorization to enter the restricted sector of Lake Mead,” we hear our cameraman say, as he continues walking.

"Bridging in the general," Command responds.

"General Teena MacArthur here," is the next voice on the line, and we didn't expect it to be a woman's voice, but it is.

"General, we're tailing a man who appeared in sector 19:55, request to continue into restricted territory 19:69 to apprehend the trespasser."

There's a pause, then the general comes back on the line, "Recently, we had detected two Treer SUVs cutting through the desert, but we lost them in the sandstorm... authorization approved to continue into the restricted area."

"I'm with Private Spillane as well," our cameraman discloses.

"Permission granted for the both of you. Keep me abreast to any and all sightings of the trespasser, and keep a lookout for two black Treer SUVs."

"10-4, General," our cameraman radios, and when he looks up, we find that the soldiers are at the same crossroads that Boxer arrived at.

The soldier on screen turns, and asks, "What do you think? Go for it?"

"Aren't you just a little curious?" the other soldier responds.

Before a selection is made, the feed switches back to Boxer's desert trek, but something is off. What we're watching immediately feels wrong- the footage has time-jumped- the sun is now setting. We're still watching him from a rifle sight, but is it the *same* rifle sight? Did this armed voyeur track Boxer as day became night?

We look to the sky, and see the sun burning brightly above us.

"This is happening in the desert outside of Lake Mead?" we ask, and when Pilot nods to confirm it is, our next question becomes, "And... where is Lake Mead?"

*"About 24 miles off the strip."*

"Why is the sun setting there right now?"

*"It's not."*

"It is on our feed."

*"Sure is."*

This discrepancy is a revelation. The footage we're watching isn't being transferred in real time. If everything is shot in advance, edited, then sent out, we briefly consider asking Pilot if this is just a new way that Hollywood is getting focus group reactions to potential properties- like hype trailers screened physically alongside a star. We imagine a Hollywood executive saying, *Show it to some of those tourist zombies down at the Mariasol and if even half of those retards understand what's happening in the damn*

*film, let Boxer's team move forward with that seemingly never-ending cut and we'll give them the money for the extra CGI.*

Not only has the sunlight changed in this footage, Boxer now seems unsteady. His large feet take slow steps, until he collapses, most likely from exhaustion, near the edge of a desert highway. We know he's going to be alright- Pilot has assured us this much- and it's almost like whoever's directing this footage knows that we know because, after Boxer goes down, they cut back to the helmet-cam of the two soldiers.

Our cameraman emerges from the static of gusting sand, and now stands at the precipice of a sharp decline down toward what resembles a large and intricate maze, which stretches to the edge of a lake. Since there probably aren't too many lakes in the desert, we must be looking at Lake Mead. The other soldier doesn't appear anywhere in frame, so we ask, "Did they split up?"

*"You aren't watching the feed from the soldiers anymore."*

"Then who's filming this?"

*"This vantage point is from the bodycam of Lester Stubbs, a Clarke County park ranger who unfortunately has found himself off the beaten path after being called out to investigate certain 'environmental anomalies.' Poor Lester here is about to stumble upon a closely guarded secret."*

A walkie-talkie enters the frame, as Lester reports, "We've got gigantic sand formations out here. I've never seen anything like this."

The response that crackles over the radio frequency is, "Well, Lester... we just had a category five sandstorm. Meteorologists are saying it's the biggest thing to hit this area since the invention of meteorology."

"How long ago was that?" Lester asks.

"When the sandstorm hit?" is the crackling response.

"No. The invention of meteorology."

"Whenever they stopped using those farmer's almanacs," the voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie says, without conviction.

"You'd think that with all the knowledge that the farmer in charge of the almanac had, he could've predicted meteorology and diversified his offerings," Lester jokes.

For a moment, it's just static, then the voice on the other end of the line says, "10-4. Information is only valuable if you act on it."

"How come this information is being radioed in if this ranger is wearing a bodycam?" we ask.

*"Because Lester doesn't know his body cam is Fluid Karma enabled. He thinks he has to bring the footage back to the ranger's station for them to see it."*

"They never told him this?"

*"They never told anyone."*

Lester begins making his way down the dune in a crisscross pattern, as he says, "Well, here's some information for ya, tell me how to act on it... these formations... they've got right angles. It looks like some kind of maze. Did we buy this land just to turn it into some type of amusement park?"

"Doubt it. Why would they build an amusement park in the middle of nowhere?"

"Thing is, it's not just a maze, at the far end... there are these tents... and there's a black limousine getting a military escort."

The radio crackles for a moment, then a confirmation is given, "That's the President. We just got news of his arrival."

Lester pauses his descent, awestruck, then asks, "Did we build our President a giant sand maze to amuse himself with?"

"I don't think so, but I also can't confirm or deny this theory with any substantial confidence."

"Then what the fuck is he doing here?" Lester asks, continuing his way down the dune.

"His security team is probably asking the same question about you right now," the voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie responds, then the feed cuts away and we are now watching Lester Stubbs from about a hundred yards out.

*"There ya go. We're back with the army men you missed so much."*

We tense up at this image. We understand that this footage could end with a bang. The sight cam follows Lester as he zigzags down the last of the steep incline, eventually making his way to the mouth of the maze. We hear our cameraman radio in, "General Teena MacArthur, this is Private Aldrich, over."

“Private Aldrich, this is General Teena MacArthur, please state your findings.”

“We have a Clarke County park ranger that's just entered the sand formation, and he appears to be making his way toward the tents.”

“Detain him,” is the general's response.

“And if he resists?”

“Permission to use deadly force,” Teena confirms.

“10-4, General.”

And with this permission, the rifle is lowered, and the feed switches back to the soldier's helmet-cam.

The two soldiers make their way down the dune, to the mouth of the maze in the restricted area.

The soldier whose feed isn't currently streaming enters the maze first, and the cameraman follows close behind. They move with careful consideration, strafing through the maze, piece-by-piece, until the lead soldier lifts his fist, then the feed cuts to Lester's body cam, and we can't figure out if this is a good thing or not.

We lean toward the screen, and it sounds like Lester is choking, then the angle on the body cam lowers and we see a dead, fly-covered monkey on the sandy floor of the maze. We know this is a monkey and not a small child because its sharp teeth are bared, likely because it was screaming in pain before it died.

A walkie-talkie appears in frame, and through deep swallows of climbing stomach bile, Lester radios, “We got... uh... a monkey.”

The voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie squawks back, “Sounded like ya said ya got a... monkey?”

“Yeah, a decomposing monkey.”

“That... doesn't bode well,” the voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie declares.

Lester turns away from the monkey, continuing further into the maze, despite this ominous trail marker. Cautiously, he progresses to the next corner in the maze, where we glance the front end of a black SUV just beyond the next sand wall. It looks exactly like the vehicle described by the general.

The camera moves toward the SUV, and the smoked char that reaches from the trunk to the driver's seat indicates that this vehicle was hit with some type of explosive.

Since the SUV seems to pose no threat anymore, Lester sprints toward it, and in a particularly pathetic move, he tries to get under the front grill to hide. He must have heard the army men in pursuit and is now in panic-mode. As Lester tries to get under the vehicle, he radios, "There's a Treer vehicle out here. Looks like a FluidKar prototype. Never seen it before. It's in rough shape. Appears that it... got hit by... a missile?"

"In the middle of a maze?" the voice on the other end of the radio inquires.

Smartly abandoning the plan of getting under the SUV, Lester scrambles to his feet, and makes his way to the front driver's side door. He tries to pull the door open, and on the third tug, he's able to swing it ajar. Lester's body camera focuses on the driver's seat and the charred driver who's fused to it.

Lester lets out a shriek at this sight, and a split-second later we hear the barked command of, "On the ground, now!"

The camera whirls around to face both soldiers. Their masks are off, and for the first time, we see the cameraman's face. He's familiar- he had appeared on a singing competition and lost out to a mixed-race teen with a way shittier voice, but far more marketing potential. "You're not authorized to be here! Get on the ground!" the singer-turned-soldier demands forcefully, with perfect pitch.

"Don't shoot me!" Lester begs, frozen.

"Sir, I'm not going to tell you again! Get the fuck on the ground!"

Unwilling to go quietly, Lester tries to get into the still-open door of the SUV, and during this feeble attempt, his body cam provides an intimately close view of the charred driver.

There's a single loud, "POP," then the screen goes black, and Lester becomes the third corpse in the maze.

"Pilot, this is too much," we say, turning away from an ever-increasing body count. Jittering with an unnerved panic, we leave the turret. We can't face Pilot because we're embarrassed by our cowardice, and we can't face the laptop because we don't want to see the terror.

*"C'mon. Don't leave the roof."*

"Is that a request or a warning?" we mumble.

Pilot doesn't answer, so we turn, and start to say, "Anyone else can do this. Anyone else can give you the insight you need-" but Pilot shakes his head until we stop talking.



*“-you can't leave now. Especially not now. Look at the screen. I need your help. This is a key point. There's this home video footage that seems superfluous for me to watch and I have no idea why it's edited into this cut. These types of mysteries are why you're here.”*

“Pilot, you've been...” we start to say, but a quick glance at the laptop screen silences us, and pulls us back to our seat.

Watching us in excited wonder, Pilot regards us like *we're* the star.

*“What do you see? Why are you reacting like this?”*

Our eyes stay on the screen and the back of our brain warms with a euphoric nostalgia.

*“Do you understand why this old footage is cut in here?”*

“Shh,” we hiss at him.

As the footage plays, our mouth opens and we inhale a stutter of a triple-breath.

From a gun turret in Santa Monica, we time travel back to 2005.

Three years ago, we took a trip to Texas to visit with our cousin who moved there so her father could begin some very early work on the Eliot/Frost campaign. It was our uncle's job to turn Bobby Frost- a good ol' boy- into a decent old man, fitting of a VP position on Tommy Eliot's campaign.

Our cousin's name is America, and she received that name because her birthday is July 4<sup>th</sup>. Due to the fact that it's also a holiday, America's birthday was always the best party of the year, and we refused to miss it just because she moved halfway across the country.

This particular year, America asked for, and received, a MiniDV camera as her big birthday gift. When she suggested we shoot footage of the party, we jumped at the opportunity because we were eager to play around with a toy we simply couldn't afford. We were always thinking about sending an application to a film school or two, and this experiment seemed like a good test to see if we had any skill behind the camera.

We decided that we'd shoot as much as we could during the cookout, then the next day we would download an editing program. It wasn't about getting good footage, or interesting footage, it was about getting average footage, then assembling it into something special.

As soon as America had the camera unwrapped, we plugged it in, and waited for the battery to charge. The moment we had three out of four battery bars juiced up, we unplugged the camera and began filming.

With America, we made our way through the house, taking turns capturing images that we thought could make the final cut. Editing with only the stop button, the day was chronicled in sequential order- our aunts getting the food ready, the crowded candles being blown out on a cake frosted to look like the American flag, then the arrival of guests. These were people who hadn't seen each other in months, people who lived thousands of miles apart, and they were suddenly at the same place at the same time. Capturing these moments and making them eternal felt good, but we knew the real challenge would be assembling everything into a coherent narrative that would hold meaning to someone who wasn't there. Pilot told us that the footage seemed pretty pointless to him, beyond being a historical document, which means we failed at our task.

We relive July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005, as the camera moves through America's house, but slices of time are missing, this footage was not only edited in-camera, but subsequently edited by a third party for time- cut, trimmed, and shuffled. We wonder who got hold of this footage and made the edits. It certainly wasn't America. She was so traumatized by what we captured that day, as far as we know, she's never picked up her birthday gift again.

We have to hold in the rush of emotions we get as the camera focuses on family pictures on the wall, then swoops away with a teen's attention span, cutting to a close up of a woman's hands in the sink. In our cousin's living room, the camera swings back and forth, until it's pointed directly at a framed mirror, and for a moment, we see our reflection.

We feel Pilot rock forward in the chair when this happens, and we mimic the movement.

The footage mercifully cuts to a warm discussion in the kitchen between our mother, her sister, and their friends. Waiting to be acknowledged, the camera lingers, but the women are too fixated on their conversation to notice.

After a hand-off, the camera travels out into the yard. It whips around to focus on our uncle, who stands at the grill, apron on, an American flag adorned hat shielding his eyes from the sun, and we hear America ask, "Still the Bar-B-Q king?"

Our uncle notices he's on camera, then stands at attention, and says, "I'm the head cook and the chief bottle washer." He had learned this in the war- one of them- maybe Desert Storm. We aren't sure which one he fought in.

The footage abruptly cuts to a preteen girl we had met the day our flight landed in Texas. The partygoers chant, "Cartwheel, cartwheel!" then the girl skillfully tumbles for our camera.

America pans to our Aunt Sue, sitting in a lawn chair next to a woman we don't recognize. Aunt Sue points a clear plastic water gun at the camera, then pulls the trigger. A spray of water launches toward the lens, and Aunt Sue shrieks, "I didn't know it had water in it!"

The footage cuts- we remember wiping off the lens- but the camera was off when it happened, so that moment only exists in our memory.

The now-dry lens drifts onto the porch, then returns inside the house.

The camera focuses on a group of festive balloons that float in front of the picture window, then the image is suddenly washed out in a flash of light from the horizon. The noise from the blast arrives on a delay, preempted by a shock wave of sirens. This anachronism should've been confusing, but we recall it being a comfort because it meant whatever was happening wasn't close enough to immediately roll through the neighborhood and incinerate everything.

With a *Blair Witch Project* jostling, the camera returns to the front yard, as everyone at the party steps into the street, to observe a growing mushroom cloud. Those watching do so with their body turned away from the blast, ready to dash to safety, despite the location of "safety" being so vague.

This is how the American Hiroshima happened. Terrorists were able to smuggle nuclear weapons- purchased by Osama Bin Laden from the Russians- over the Mexican border into Texas with the aid of Mexican guerrillas. They detonated the nukes in two midsize Texas cities where there was little domestic counter-terrorism surveillance.

Pilot is turned away from the aftermath of the blast, and his entire attention is now focused on us.

"Your family..."

"...starred in that video," we finish the statement, then we sit silently on the turret, and think about those two flashes of light- the first one at the Mexican border in El Paso- the second one in Abilene.

Two hundred thousand just... gone, and for what?

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2005. In a single day, the world had changed forever, World War III began, and we had a front-row seat for everything we didn't want to see.

*This is why we're here.*

Pilot touches us for the first time, and it's a gesture of care.

*"You can't change the past, so let's focus on changing the future."*

Pilot's relative calm is something that we envy, yet also feel frustrated by. Maybe we're also a bit scared. He sounds like a man who has been worn down, and worn down, and worn down, until complacency with the horrors of this new millennium became his standard operating protocol.

The afternoon now wobbles in a surreal haze. Just now, the king of a pop culture war, sat on his lethal throne, in front of a computer, and he watched us, just like we watched him when he had his TV show. He no longer has that TV show, and war has changed Pilot- it's turned him into one of us. He empathizes with us, and instead of giving orders, he asks questions:

*"Did you lose any of them?"*

"That day? No. We evacuated immediately. It was like... something out of a movie," we respond, keeping it together.

*"Regardless, I hope it's very clear to you that I didn't make you watch that as an act of cruelty. I never made the connection between you and that reflection in the video. I hope you believe me about that. This isn't a trick, and the video stream will cut out by dinner, so please just stay until that happens."*

"What if we don't?"

*"Think about it, we're sitting on a turret. The only way for you to make an exit from here is in the path of this."*

Pilot puts a hand atop the high powered rifle to the right of the screen, and as he does this, the footage on the screen changes.

Our eyes, instead of focusing on the new information on the laptop, stay focused on Pilot as he makes direct eye contact with us, the scar on his face acting as a powerful reminder that he didn't walk away after seeing the blast, or flee to Mexico when he was drafted. If we walk away, we won't end up scarred like Pilot. If we walk away, we'll be leaving Pilot to save the

world, again, while we go to an In-N-Out and listen to the theme song of Pilot's show on an iPod made by kids in a country that gradually resents us more by the day because they see us as fat people consuming content layered atop itself like a cheeseburger of disposable entertainment via wireless power, while turning a blind eye as the rest of the world suffers.

This new understanding forces us to look back to the screen, knowing that we need to catch up, because we're staring at a person we've never seen before. A bald, overweight man is being filmed by the internal dashcam of his car, and after a full minute of watching this guy tap his thumbs on the wheel, we ask, "Who's this guy? Do you know him?"

*"That... is Fortunio Balducci."*

"Should we know who he is?" we ask.

*"No, not really. He's a 'talent booker' who's currently returning from a weekend of drunken revelry on Lake Mead."*

"He's a good guy, right?" we ask.

*"I suppose your opinion of Fortunio will hinge on your opinion of those who regularly enjoy drunken revelry."*

"Drunken revelry is pretty much the only reason we came to California."

*"I'm glad to hear that. We're going to have a great time on your vacation."*

Bonded by a mutual re-witnessing of the July 4<sup>th</sup> tragedy, we feel Pilot exhibiting a new camaraderie with us. In order to keep from smiling like we're mentally deficient, we look back to the screen, and we watch as Fortunio squints at the road ahead, then throws on his blinker. He mumbles, "Not my problem. Not my problem. Okay. Damn it, alright," to himself, then we see his hand slide down the wheel, to pull the car onto the shoulder.

When the scenery no longer moves behind Fortunio, we hear a door whine open, then he exits the frame. The feed remains focused on the empty front seat, and the car door must be open because we can hear a repetitive dinging, as well as Fortunio saying, "Hey!" twice- louder the second time. After we don't hear a response to Fortunio's increasingly demanding greeting, he says, "C'mon, buddy, you can't sleep here. It's not safe."

For twenty seconds, the only stimulus is the *ding-ding-ding* of a warning regarding the keys being left in the ignition.

“Oh, shit. Boxer Santaros!” we hear Fortunio exclaim, breaking the monotony, then this is followed by a grunt, and we have to presume he tried to pick Boxer up. There are extensive complications when it comes to moving this mass of man. It's possible that Fortunio is staying and making this effort because it's jarring for him to see such a strong and powerful man at his lowest. Maybe this vulnerable man reminded Fortunio of his own pudgy vulnerability, or maybe Fortunio is just going to steal Boxer's wallet, then drive away.

“Ah, shit. You're all dehydrated. I'm gonna get you some water. We'll get you out of here,” we hear Fortunio say, but we can only stare at the empty interior of the Treer SUV because there are no additional cameras the feed can hop to.

We hear a series of grunts and the sound of popping gravel, intermixed with the dinging car. We hear another door open in Fortunio's car, then, out of breath, Fortunio says, “How 'bout we stand up, and get in the car, then I'll get you some water?”

Boxer doesn't appear on the dashcam, and Fortunio can't force him to do anything he doesn't want to, so an audible is called, “How 'bout I get you water from the car, you drink it, get a second wind, then you'll stand up, and get in the car?”

It's silent for a moment, then Fortunio reappears in frame as he reaches across the front seat and grabs a water bottle from the cup holder, then he disappears again.

Suddenly, we hear Boxer choking on the water, and we have to hope that Fortunio didn't get too frustrated and resorted to water-boarding Boxer until he stands. We feel better when we hear Fortunio say, “You have to swallow it if you're going to re-hydrate.”

Finally, Boxer enters the frame as he's helped into the back seat. Fortunio lovingly pushes him into the middle seat- so he can watch Boxer while he drives- then he reaches over the massive man and clicks in the seat belt.

Fortunio leaves the frame for a moment, and we hear a car door shut, then he reappears, returning to the driver's seat. When he pulls his door closed, this mercifully silences the dinging.

“Alright, wheels are rollin',” Fortunio says, then adds, “You can never be too careful out here. One minute it's smooth sailing, the next minute...” Fortunio's statement drifts away. He throws on his directional, and pulls

back into the flow of traffic.

We watch the background blur as they pick up speed, and Fortunio, very obviously still feeling the effects of his Lake Mead nights, starts rambling, "Next gas station, we'll stop. I've had hangovers like what you're facing before, no judgment on my part." He lifts his hands from the wheel for a moment as though he's surrendering to the same demons that he seems to believe have brought Boxer out into the desert. "I was just gambling in Vegas, and I figured when in Vegas do as the... Vegans do. *No*. That can't be right. Venetians? No, that's the name of a casino... Or the name of a type of window blinds... What do you call a person who's from Vegas?" Fortunio asks, then looks into the rearview mirror, awaiting the answer.

"I don't know," Boxer's strained voice says, then he questions, "Did you bring me out here? Did you do this to me?"

Fortunio furrows his brow, then restates the question so it's more to his liking before answering it, "Did I save your life as you were lying on the side of the road? Yes. I sure did."

"Why was I there?"

"Isn't that the question I'm supposed to ask you?" Fortunio responds.

"I... I don't know why I was out there."

"What's the last thing you remember?" Fortunio asks, helping Boxer backtrack as though he lost his keys.

"Waking up."

"In the desert?"

Boxer nods.

"And where were you before that?"

"There... is no 'before that,'" Boxer realizes, his eyes going wide.

"Well, this is going to be a riveting conversation," Fortunio snarks, then he reaches over and turns on the radio, instantly accepting a nearly unlistenable country song that pumps out of the car's speakers.

"What in the hell is this?" Boxer asks, his voice booming, his star quality fully realized.

"This is a charity single, by Liz Cheney, off of her country western album to benefit the survivors in Abilene. Show some respect," Fortunio demands, with a distinctly-American pride.

"Ah, I can hear her husband beating the war drum now," Boxer responds.

Fortunio jabs the console to change the radio station, and mumbles, "I thought you couldn't remember anything?"

"Something about that last name- Cheney- hits me in my core, like its evil transcends my memory handicap," Boxer correctly notes.

Fortunio ends his channel surfing when a super-saccharine pop song replaces the tragedy-triumph dirge.

Boxer's eyes light up as he hears the stabbing synths of the song, and he declares, "Now we're talking!"

Sharp electronic beats slam the speakers and a babydoll voice sings:

*"Teen horniness is not a crime  
Open your heart  
and your mind  
Horniness is on the rise  
Look inside and you will find  
Teen horniness is not a crime"*

Fortunio's amusement mirrors Boxer's enthusiasm when this happens, and he asks, "You like this one?"

"How can I not?" Boxer declares.

It seems like an idea strikes Fortunio, and he asks, "How'd you like to meet her?"

"Who?"

"The girl singing this song."

"The teen horniness girl?" Boxer asks, his eyes going wide at the mere possibility.

"Indeed."

"A better question is, are you an angel, and are you driving me out of purgatory, toward Heaven?" Boxer asks, then he looks down at his chest and seems to discover the straps of his backpack. He pulls on the padded straps, and when he realizes they aren't part of the seat belt, he slides the backpack off, then sets it in his lap.

The camera angle switches to surveillance footage of four gas pumps, and after twenty-seconds of zero activity, we see a FluidKar SUV pass the pumps, then come to a stop in a parking space.

We watch Fortunio get out of the SUV, but Boxer's door remains closed.

Instead of seeing what Boxer is doing in the car, we watch from a gas station mini-mart security camera, as Fortunio goes about picking up



various snack foods. It's annoying that we're stuck watching this shopping trip instead of getting a good look regarding what Boxer is doing in the SUV because we have a feeling that when the feed flicks back to the dashcam, Boxer will be gone. Despite his sorry condition when Fortunio first found him, Boxer became pretty high energy when he was seat-dancing to "Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime," and he could now easily flee, if he wanted to.

We watch on the external security camera as Fortunio emerges from the convenience store and walks back toward the FluidKar SUV with two full bags of food that's barely food and beverages that are mostly sugar.

The moment Fortunio opens the door of the SUV, the camera feed switches to the dashcam, and we see Boxer, still in the back seat, holding up a syringe, just like the one he injected himself with in the desert.

Fortunio glances at Boxer's raised hand, and reacts as quickly as he can to grab the syringe. The needle seems to have pierced Boxer's skin, but he didn't even have a chance to inject himself before Fortunio disarmed him.

We come to understand how powerful this drug is when we see that Boxer is bathing in an obvious euphoria merely off the small amount of Liquid Karma that entered him.

Fortunio reaches across the center console, and we hear the glove box flop open. After some rearranging, we hear the glove box click shut.

Back behind the wheel, instead of putting the SUV in reverse, Fortunio fiddles with something in his lap. He must have taken this item out of the glove box to make room for the syringe. We hear an electronic beep, then he lifts what appears to be a MiniDV camera.

Turning the camera toward a high Boxer, Fortunio asks, "Who sent you out into the desert with a syringe of pure unoxidized Liquid Karma?"

Boxer doesn't reply. He's in a saucer-eyed haze.

*This* will be how Boxer pays for his ride out of the desert- with a video that will be sold to *TMZ*, or *FameDiet* or that reprehensible blog, *ThisSpoiledBitch*.

Boxer is so wide-eyed and distant that Fortunio starts asking questions to escalate the video's value, "Are you here with me right now, Boxer Santaros?"

"Where am I?" Boxer asks, as he raises his hands, and for a moment we think he's praying like an altar boy, but then the tips of his fingers start tapping each other in a nervous patter.

"You're in the Nevada desert... a few miles west of Lake Mead," Fortunio says.

"What year is it?" Boxer asks.

Fortunio laughs, then checks his dash, "The date is June 28th, 2008."

Based on Boxer's reaction, he wasn't expecting this answer.

We weren't expecting this answer either, primarily because today is June 29<sup>th</sup>.

"What were you doing out there on the road where I found you? Were you location scouting? Did you get lost?" Fortunio asks.

"I don't remember," Boxer says, and this clearly compounds the concern he feels so his fingertips dance even faster.

"You don't remember? Do you remember... anything?" Fortunio asks, finally getting the answers he's been looking for.

Boxer pauses, his wide-eyes staring at his fingers as their tapping pace slows, then he says, "Jellyfish."

Fortunio laughs, as this clearly catches him off guard, then he asks, "Anything in particular about them?"

"They will retake all of this from us, one day," Boxer responds, pretty serious about the matter.

Fortunio lowers the camera, then turns it off. He knows he has enough footage to sell, and it seems like he doesn't want to go further, because it's become clear to him just how fucked up Boxer really is.

After Fortunio places the MiniDV camera next to the syringe in the glove compartment, he starts the SUV and resumes the trip.

Boxer remains wide-eyed, but his hands now rest limply in his lap.

From the dashcam, we can see the guilt on Fortunio's face as he dwells on the fact that he started out doing a genuinely good thing and asked for nothing in return, but after a quick supply run, he had suddenly decided that Boxer owes him. After a couple minutes of grinding his teeth, Fortunio says, "Listen. I know you're trying to pretend you aren't you because I could be a psycho fan, but you don't have to worry about me. I *am* a fan... I've seen all your movies, but I meet celebrities all the time."

Boxer's eyes go wide again, and suddenly we aren't sure how much of the Liquid Karma is still coursing through him. "My movies?" he asks.

"Check your pockets and your backpack. You must be holding more than syringes of Liquid Karma. Do you have a wallet on you?" Fortunio asks.

Boxer pats his cargo shorts, then leans over and peeks in his backpack, before declaring, “No identification whatsoever.”

“Okay, in that case, I got some good news for ya,” Fortunio says, turning a bit so Boxer can read his lips, “Your name is Boxer Santaros, and you're one of the biggest movie stars in the world. You're, ya know, an actor.”

“I'm a great actor?” Boxer asks.

“No- hell no- but you're a *popular* actor...” Fortunio clarifies, “...and you were a great football player.”

“So... before I started acting, I played professional football?” Boxer asks, and he seems to appreciate the life he's built.

“Yeah, but getting injured was the best thing that ever happened to you.”

“How so?” Boxer asks.

Responding as casually to this question as he did all of the others, Fortunio says, “Because... at the end of the day...it's all about the quality of the ass you get from your job.”

Boxer nods at this, then, slightly concerned, he asks, “How's my ass quality?”

“Stellar. From what I've seen. I mean, you're getting actor ass. That's on the top of the ass totem.”

“The ass totem,” Boxer repeats, mentally filing this away.

“Yeah, there are three kinds of celebrity ass,” Fortunio says, then pauses, and adds, “Of course, by 'ass,' I mean pussy.”

“Wait, am I fucking these girls in their ass or their pussy?” Boxer questions, and for the first time, we hear Pilot really, genuinely laugh.

“That's really up to them,” Fortunio responds, then takes his right hand off the wheel and presses the top of it to the roof of the FluidKar. “This is actor ass- your level of ass.”

“That's the top of the ass totem,” Boxer notes, pleased.

“Certainly is. Then under that is athlete ass,” Fortunio's hand lowers to his shoulder.

“Football was getting in the way of my ass potential,” Boxer tells himself, maybe to deal with his departure from the sport.

“It certainly was.”

“What's the bottom of the ass totem pole?” Boxer asks.

“Well, what we're looking at here is the celebrity ass totem pole, not the regular person ass totem pole, which means, in this case, the bottom of the

totem is rockstar ass.”

Boxer looks perplexed, and asks, “Why is rockstar ass the lowest?”

“Because band whores will still fuck you in a cubby hole in a bus while some overweight drummer is inches above you,” Fortunio says.

“I can't remember shit, but even I know fucking on a bus in a cubby is low,” Boxer responds.

“Good instincts,” Fortunio assures him.

“And athlete ass, what's that like?” Boxer asks, seeking information about an alternate ass timeline for himself.

“Oh man, well, it depends on the state,” Fortunio says, then picks an example, “You show up in... Cleveland, and you'll get these skanks who hang out in the lobby of your hotel, waiting for you and your teammates to check in.”

“That sounds good. Easy. Like delivery ass.”

“It does sound easy, doesn't it? Because it is. And it's been easy for a lot of other guys before you, so you'll end up using a condom, you'll fuck her, then you'll pass out in your hotel room. She'll make sure you're zonked out, then she'll take the condom out of the trash, and she'll rush back to her own room, where she'll pull out a turkey baster... and give herself a spunk injection so she can have your kid and get a free ride.”

“So my cum is like Liquid Karma, and women will inject it into themselves?” Boxer asks.

“Absolutely,” Fortunio says.

Boxer considers this carefully, then asks, “So I have to check my ass' luggage for Thanksgiving accessories?”

“No, you get actor ass, like I said. For an athlete who looks like you though? A woman would do anything to get a piece of that DNA. Sometimes, if you're dealing with a professional ho, she'll bring their OBGYN- which is a pussy doctor- with them to the hotel.”

“Is rockstar DNA not as good as athlete DNA, or is it just hard to also fit the pussy doctor in the cubby on the bus?” Boxer asks, with what seems to be sincerity.

Fortunio laughs at this, then explains, “Chicks who fuck rockstars don't discriminate so much when it comes to looks, plus they're less about babies and more about trying to suck your soulfulness out of your dick hole.”

We feel pretty sad for Boxer that this is his reintroduction to the world. “You can be fat, bald, ugly, covered in back hair. Hell... you could have

leprosy but put a guitar in your hand and there are certain hot women who *will* fuck you.”

“So when did your band break up?” Boxer asks, and Fortunio laughs at this even though he doesn’t want to.

“If I have all this ass at my disposal, how do I choose which ass is the ass I tap?” Boxer asks.

“Hold out for the girl that you’re afraid might be able to see into your soul,” Fortunio says, then winks at Boxer in the rearview mirror.

Boxer quietly repeats, “My soul.”

Fortunio, who's finally enjoying the conversation, has the smile wiped off his face, as he brakes hard, and his gas station snacks smack the dashboard due to the sudden deceleration. We can't see out the front windshield so we aren't sure of the cause of the abrupt stop.

“What’s with all of the traffic?” Boxer asks.

“The California state line is up ahead,” Fortunio says, moving in his seat to see if he can tell how long the line is, “There’s always a huge wait to get across the border, and it's going to be an extra hassle because my interstate travel visa got stolen back in Vegas, and you don't even have an ID. If you weren’t so famous, you’d be fucked.”

“I think, no matter what, this is fucked. We should be able to travel freely in this country,” Boxer says- the action star defying authority, as is required by all scripts placed in front of him.

“It's not coming back to you yet? Abilene?” Fortunio prods his passenger, and he seems almost skeptical regarding Boxer's confusion.

At this point, we start to get a little bored by what we're seeing. The notion that Boxer Santaros has to be re-introduced to everything all over again just seems so plodding. We can't imagine sitting through explanations of the Fluid Karma that powers the SUV they're in, or the reason why state borders are so strict, or the entire history of World War III. Maybe Fortunio can just point to Boxer's syringe, and tell him that once the Liquid Karma is oxidized in the Tidal Generator, it becomes an energy source called Fluid Karma, which runs everything from FluidKars to Treer brand toasters.

Just before we're about to offer to buy Pilot dinner, the feed switches over to what looks like a military hangar. We see two Treer SUVs parked in the hangar, and one of them is the charred vehicle that Lester died trying to enter. They probably used one of the Treer zeppelins that have been

decommissioned to transport the vehicle. The zeppelin could land, they could tow the car inside it, then it could take off again, and anyone watching would never see the bombed-out vehicle.

Standing next to the charred SUV is Baron von Westphalen, who's shorter than the vehicle, and dressed like a magician- a Siegfried and Roy era magician- not that bizarre Is-This-Guy-A-Magician-Or-Just-In-A-Swedish-Metal-Band type of magician we're starting to see at the end of the aughts. Baron is a stout, balding, piggish man in his late-fifties who may have developed his genius in an act of revenge against the cards he was dealt in the looks and voice departments.

We are able to recognize Baron due to his series of massively hyped primetime specials about Fluid Karma where he would stand in front of the Pacific Ocean, with the Tidal Generator over his shoulder, and he would tell us about how the ocean now powers everything in our house and will make all our wildest dreams come true. We can quote this guy, so we shriek out, "No matter the size of your boat, it will run on the motion in the ocean."

Pilot doesn't laugh at this, but it earns us a smirk.

*"Not bad, but you have to work on your lisp. The lisp is key to a good Baron impression."*

We watch Baron carefully, because we've never had "behind the scenes" access to know what he's actually like. Every media appearance he makes is highly calculated. He's effectively painted himself to be this country's savior, but we view him more as an opportunist. When we collectively saw that the war machine was running out of gas, and there was no alternative-alternative fuel that is- the easiest get-rich-quick scheme in America became finding a fuel that could unbind us from an increasingly hostile Middle East. Baron, and his mother, Inga von Westphalen, happened to be the renegade scientists who developed a cure for our sickness. The whole world wanted access to Fluid Karma, but it just so happened that the US was the highest bidder for the technology and we secured the exclusive rights. One of the very specific requirements we had as a country was that the field would only work within US borders. Inga and Baron- at first with private investors, then later with government assistance- built a great big machine out in the ocean that would oxidize Liquid Karma and generate a hydroelectric energy field called Fluid Karma- a wireless network of electric power that would run machines by remote and ensures that they'll never have to be "refueled."

In the final primetime special we caught on USIDENTelevision, we were introduced to Baron's entire team, and the whole special looked like a Halloween party. Among the absurd outfits, Baron was dressed like a baked potato, and when he was asked if he built the world's first perpetual motion machine, he maintained that "the ocean is the world's first perpetual motion machine!" It was all very nerdy.

Still interested in Baron's posse, we ask, "Where's the rest of his creepy crew?"

*"Oh, you'll see them soon."*

Besides Baron, the only other person in the hangar is a scientist-looking guy, and luckily he's wearing a white lab coat so we don't need to ask Pilot who the guy is.

Both Baron and the man in the white lab coat study the heavily damaged SUV- all of its doors ajar.

The man in the white lab coat notes, "There was only one body in the charred SUV, while the second SUV had no one inside it when recovered."

"So what turned this driver into a whopper?" Baron asks.

"A whopper?" the scientist asks, confused.

"He was flame broiled," Baron states, dramatically slapping the hood of the SUV as he cackles at his own shitty joke.

"That's very creative," the man in the white lab coat assures him, then admits, "We don't know how the man in the SUV got whopper'd because the sandstorm obscured our satellite cameras."

"I can get video of Krysta Now putting not only a dick, but also a man's balls in her vagina, but I can't get video footage off of the dashcam of an SUV I own?" Baron complains, sounding like a typical 2008 consumer.

"That's correct," the scientist says.

Baron seems to need to reestablish his power, so he points to the charred SUV, then says, "Carefully remove The Whopper and take it to the Utopia 3 facility."

"What's Utopia 3?" we ask Pilot.

*"That's one of three main hubs for Liquid Karma harvesting and oxidation."*

"Seriously?"

*"Yes, Utopia 3 is one of the most serious places you've ever seen."*

"Never seen it."

*"Then turn around."*

We hang an arm over our seatback and crane our neck to see that, next to the four-legged Tidal Generator, is a boxy building that might qualify as a man-made vegetationless island. Since the Tidal Generator is essentially a linear acceleration device on the ocean floor that harnesses energy from deep within the Earth's crust, the command center *had* to be right next to it. The island was created to protect every other island on the globe.

When we turn back to the screen, Baron now has his arm around a beautiful Chinese girl who might be in her twenties or could be pushing forty- she's in that sweet spot for Asians where age truly is just a number.

"That gal is the crown jewel of Baron's reject genius crew," we say, admiring the tall, burnt-orange-haired, raccoon-eyed girl.

*"That... is Serpentine."*

"That's her name? Serpentine? Just Serpentine?"

*"Sure. I mean, her real name is probably something else, but once she realized we're too lazy to learn how to pronounce it correctly, I bet she replaced it with something we could handle."*

We nod at this because it seems to check out, and we appreciate that Serpentine did this for us.

We watch with pleasure as Serpentine stares at the charred SUV and smokes a Cruella de Vil cigarette. With a heavy accent that makes her tongue an untamed serpent every time she encounters an L or a "th," Serpentine hisses, "Da President is waiting to see you. He would like to know what happened."

Baron sighs angrily, then turns back to the guy in the lab coat, and demands, "Find me the driver of the second SUV. He's out there, somewhere."

The man in the white lab coat pauses, then asks, "Do you want me to get the body to Utopia 3 or do you want me to find the driver?"

"I have confidence in your abilities to handle both situations," Baron growls.

"You are aware that I'm a forensic scien-"

"-you'll be the next guy they find in an SUV BBQ if you don't do what I say," Baron threatens, then the feed switches again.

We don't make a pitch to go down to the Mariasol for dinner- we stay on the turret because some of this footage feels like real news. It's devoid of



talking heads, and thousands of crawls, and commercial breaks, so it's refreshing. This is the only time we've ever channel surfed between information that actually seems to have a purpose, and there are none of the demands of capitalism fracturing the narrative. After watching footage from Iraq and seeing tanks roll by with HUSTLER blasted on the side of them we just assumed that advertising would cover everything, then we found this feed, and it's a vacation of advertising overload. The only thing we're being sold in this chair is the idea that the world is about to end. Right now, honestly, we don't buy it- which is why we think we can help Pilot.

On the screen, we see the floor of a casino from a crystal clear security camera.

*"To get their visas, Fortunio and Boxer have stopped at Wild Bill's Casino on the Nevada/California state line."*

"The roller coaster place?" we ask, recalling seeing a pamphlet for it in the lobby of the Motel 6 we're staying in.

*"That's the place."*

We watch Fortunio's bald head, and Boxer's green hood make their way through the casino, and we have audio on the feed, which would have troubled us hours ago, but now just seems par for the course.

"Didn't you say you were coming back from a weekend of gambling when you found me, and now we're back at a casino?" Boxer asks, confusion in his voice.

"It happens," Fortunio says.

After putting his mitt of a hand on Fortunio's shoulder, Boxer mentions, sincerely, "I don't know much, but I think you might have a gambling problem, my friend. You helped me, now maybe I can help you."

Fortunio is walking with purpose, as he humorlessly explains, "We're not here for the sluts or the slots. We're here because my friend, Karl, is the manager of a club inside this casino. He can get us some travel visas by morning, but we need to keep a low profile."

Boxer grabs onto Fortunio, stopping him in his tracks, as he looks in wonderment, and marvels, "This is truly incredible. There's a roller coaster in this casino."

Fortunio looks to the edge of the frame, and says, "The Desperado." It's only when something else- a freestanding poster surrounding in a metal frame- gets Fortunio's attention, that he drifts away from Boxer and the

feed follows him. We see that “The Desperado” is the roller coaster, and from our vantage point, a CAPS LOCK declaration can be read on the sign in front of Fortunio, “KRYSTA NOW - APPEARING TONIGHT. WILD BILL’S CASINO-BAR.”

“That bitch,” Fortunio says, under his breath.

“What type of ass is *that* on the totem pole?” Boxer asks, obviously interested in Krysta’s image on the poster.

“That’s porn girl ass,” Fortunio says, staring at the ass hatefully.

“Who gets porn girl ass?” Boxer inquires.

“The highest bidder,” Fortunio responds.

“In that case, let’s go to one of those tables with the card games so we can play ‘Turnover My Card, Sir,’ until we’re rich,” Boxer says, understanding what’s going on in the casino, even if he doesn’t know the games by name.

Still fixated on the poster of Krysta Now, Fortunio says, “Come on, follow me. Just keep your hood up.”

The duo makes their way past the entrance of the roller coaster, to one of the many bars inside Wild Bill’s casino.

The feed switches to the bar’s security camera, and everything is bathed in a red tinge. There are tables scattered around a phallic looking runway ending with a stripper pole on a circular stage. The cherry hue causes bright items to bleed into each other on Pilot’s laptop screen, and Fortunio might view this as valuable camouflage.

On either side of the club are long well-stocked bars, but no one faces the bar, everyone is turned to the stage in anticipation of the main attraction.

An announcer that we can’t locate comes over the speakers to say, “Ladies and gentlemen... from Hollywood, California... please welcome... Miss Krysta Now!

The men at the tables (and a couple Lesbians) hoot and howl as Krysta Now, the beautiful blonde from the poster outside the roller coaster, steps out onto the runway wearing a pink fur outfit held together by sheer lace.

Instead of walking the length of the runway, Krysta immediately turns on her tall heels, then bends down, ass pointed to the crowd.

We see Boxer freeze when this happens, and he watches as Krysta retrieves a stack of note cards, then she slowly slinks back up.

Instead of the music beginning to signal the start of her striptease, Krysta begins reading the cards, one-by-one. Her opening statement is, *"Teen horniness is not a crime."* She drops a card, and it flutters to her feet, then she takes a step forward. *"Just ask those nerds who shot up Columbine,"* she reads, then drops the card, and takes a step forward. *"Did they ever get laid?"* Krysta reads, then drops another card. The crowd treats this question as rhetorical, but Krysta doesn't and she answers it, *"No. They never got laid,"* she takes a beat, then realizes there's more on the card, *"Never got laid. Never... got laid."*

There's an awkward cough from the bewildered audience, then a drunken heckler shouts, "You can't prove that!"

Krysta stares at the heckler defiantly, then reads her final card, *"We are an erotic nation. All your legislation... can't stop teen's masturbation. Teen horniness is not a crime. Keep an open heart and an open mind."*

"Okay, she won me over with that last part," the heckler informs the group, then politely takes a seat.

Krysta dips for a dramatic bow, while receiving a smattering of semi-supportive, yet very confused applause.

A skinny guy in a polo shirt, a little slow on the uptake, says loudly, "Oh! Like the song, right?" No one responds to this, so the guy tries to sing the second verse in a frail falsetto. Something is thrown at the singer, which causes him to sit down. Krysta blows him a kiss, then the beat to "Teen Horniness is Not a Crime" drops, and she begins to strut forward, ready to get down to business.

Despite the rough start, Krysta is quickly met with a sea of dollar bills.

When she reaches the centerpiece of the club, Krysta curls around the stripper pole like a snake, and if she was handing out apples, every member of the audience would take a bite. This is a woman at the height of her powers, and her routine is almost athletic in its toe-touching stretches, body-weight supporting pole twirls, and general potential for broken ankles compliments of Krysta's tall, clear heels.

When Krysta's top comes off, we see a pair of tits that are vividly familiar to us, yet still tantalizing. It's like we can feel her body heat even with a screen separating us, and our blood seems ten degrees warmer because of it. Even Fortunio is blushing, or maybe that's just the lighting.

Krysta's routine proves to be part "Oops, I Did It Again" and part, "No, yeah, actually, that was intentional, I meant to fuck the stage again."

As rocky as the show started, Krysta ends it fully nude, with the audience no longer at their tables, creating a situation that easily would become a genuine security issue if she stays on stage a second longer.

The music ends, and after plugging her single while collecting her cash, Krysta leaves the stage.

Our thrill is quickly overtaken by shame, and we didn't even cum. The feed is following Krysta, instead of remaining in the club, which means we're now seeing backstage.

Watching Krysta stare at her naked, toned body in front of a massive mirror, we're both incredibly thankful, and profoundly disgusted that we would remove Krysta's right to privacy for our own pleasure. Krysta grabs a white silk robe, and this keeps us from full-on moral objection that Pilot hasn't acknowledged how fucked up this is.

Once she has her robe cinched at her waist, Krysta sits down in front of the dressing room mirror and at first, it looks like she's rubbing her head, but then she grabs her hairline and pulls off her hair. She's been wearing a blonde wig not only for her performance today, but possibly for all her other performances as well.

She unpins her brunette locks, and they fall to her shoulders.

As she begins combing out her long brown hair, we start to see a different girl. We were sure of Krysta Now's identity, but now we are presented with someone else- a companion to Krysta- almost a sister of sorts.

A hammering knock plays through the laptop speakers, and we realize we have audio of the backstage area as well.

Krysta calls out, "Come in!" without even turning back to the door to see who it is.

A tall man in his mid-forties, dressed in a suit and tie, walks into frame, and Krysta immediately defends herself, "Now, Karl, I know you're a bar manager and-"

"-just listen for a second Krysta. We've received some complaints from our customers. They don't come here to watch our dancers read poetry."

Krysta's eyes deconstruct Karl, and she says, "Maybe they don't, but what they *do* come here to do is drink- which means when you put my name on the marquee you can raise drink prices, so in return for that extra cash I net you, all I ask is for your understanding and support regarding my new endeavors. My movies are real, real, popular out here in the desert,

and I'm transitioning into a new career, as a more 'Now' Krysta. They're merely getting the privilege of the first look."

"They just want to look at and into your asshole," Karl says flatly.

"And they can... at the end of my stanzas," Krysta declares.

"I think this is the end," Karl sighs.

"The end?"

"Consider it me helping with your transition," Karl mumbles, then leaves the room, slamming the door behind him.

Krysta goes back to combing her hair, trying to keep herself from crying, but she has to face her reflection, and this complicates matters. We watch both girls- the one in the dressing room, and the one in the mirror- as their smiles drop, and their faces sag- they look tired, like Karl.

Krysta stands up and for a moment we believe she's going to follow after Karl, but something stops her. In frustration, she throws her brush as hard as she can, narrowly missing the camera we're watching her on.

"Was that intentional? Was she aiming for us?" we ask Pilot.

*"Krysta knows things."*

"Like the fact that she's being watched as she gets dressed?"

*"Absolutely."*

"And she's okay with that?"

*"She demands it."*

We look back to the screen, and Krysta drops her robe so she can get dressed. We don't feel any guilt for leering because of the easy moral-out that Pilot gave us. *She wants us to watch, we're doing her a favor.*

We watch as she does her outfit change, then reapplies her wig. Her confidence visibly builds as this persona is assumed.

Krysta, now dressed in a pink tank top and short frayed jean shorts, steps out of the dressing room, and the feed returns to the red-drenched club.

Subsumed in the cherry tinge, Krysta walks past the tables of gawking men, toward the bar. When she reaches an open stool, she's immediately provided with a martini from the bartender, and as fast as the drink arrives, so do the men.

The way the camera is framed, Krysta is to the far left, and on the far right side of the frame, Fortunio and Boxer observe from a distance.

To make sure no one starts doing some weird shit like smelling her hair, Krysta has to sit on the bar stool in a familiar reverse cowgirl orientation.

This is a power-position. Set up like this, she can immediately clock each guy on their approach, and without a bar in front of her, she doesn't have the option to put her drink down. Krysta Now is in the "now" completely. She can handle herself, even when it appears that the men can't appropriately handle her presence.

As the strip club dudes hold out cocktail napkins for Krysta to sign or kiss, she makes small talk with them, and once there's a break in the constant demands placed upon her, she looks up for the next napkin, and a gap in the crowd allows her to make eye contact with Boxer. She takes one last sip of her martini, maybe for liquid courage or maybe because she hates to see a good drink go to waste, then she parts the men in front of her like the Red-tinged Sea.

Fortunio notices that they've been spotted, so he puts his hand on Boxer's broad back and begins pushing him out of the bar, away from Krysta. It's possible he does this because Boxer has lifted his hands and he's tapping his fingers nervously again, or maybe this exit is because Fortunio isn't ready yet to confront Krysta about her "branching out" from the services he seems to be providing her on an ongoing basis.

The two men exit the bar, and the feed hops from security camera to security camera as Fortunio leads his new friend away from an old friend.

When they reach the elevator bank, Fortunio rapidly hits the "Up" button, and the moment the doors open, the camera feed switches to a fisheye lens inside the elevator, showing us Fortunio and Boxer stepping inside.

As the doors are about to close, Krysta appears in frame, her slim body sliding inside at the last moment.

"Babe! Where have you been?" Krysta asks the side of Boxer's hood, and when he turns to her, she hugs him tightly, and purrs, "I've been worried sick."

"Krysta, control yourself," Fortunio demands, and we can't tell if he's so close with Krysta that he can be rude to her, or if he just feels like he's close to her due to the number of purple links in his browser history that contain her name.

"Control myself?" Krysta balks, "You know I don't do that." We aren't sure if Fortunio knows this because he knows Krysta or if Fortunio knows this because everyone knows this.

Accepting the fact that they're all trapped in a metal box together, Fortunio points at Krysta, then says, "Well, you know how I said I'd introduce you to your favorite popstar?"

Boxer, seeming excited he can remember something, pulls down his hood, then stares Krysta in the eyes, and says, "*Teen horniness is not a crime.*"

"*Free your heart,*" Krysta immediately responds.

"*And free your mind,*" Boxer completes the lyrics with gravitas.

"Jeez, for a second I was worried you didn't remember what we have," Krysta says, vulnerable.

"Nothing to remember, teens' horniness being noncriminal is a personal belief ingrained in my very being," Boxer says, raising a fist to his chest.

"Really?" Fortunio asks, furrowing his brow.

"Yes, really," Boxer responds, almost like he's annoyed by Fortunio's presence now.

The elevator opens, and Krysta steps out first, and Boxer follows behind her, then Fortunio behind him. We watch on a crystal-clear security camera as they make their way through what looks like the hotel portion of the casino.

"Can you show me more of your work?" Boxer asks Krysta, desperate to stay by her side.

"Of course I can. Our collaboration needs to grow," Krysta says.

"He's a different type of film star," Fortunio adds, trying to catch up with the couple.

"Maybe I am now too," Krysta responds, without confidence.

"Oh, yeah, directors are knocking down your door," Fortunio responds sarcastically.

"I know they aren't, and that's okay. I have my screenplay," Krysta announces.

"Oh, this is going to be good," Fortunio keeps up the sarcasm.

"I agree. I bet it will be good," Boxer responds.

"You only think that because you can't remember Krysta's shitty acting," Fortunio mumbles, and Krysta stops walking after he says this.

Looking at Boxer, Krysta says, "Of course you think it will be good. You helped me write it."

"Bull. Shit," Fortunio responds.

"Don't worry, I didn't add anything new since our last session," Krysta tells Boxer.

"Krysta, don't you think I'd know if you had a history with him?" Fortunio asks.

"Don't believe me? I'll prove it," Krysta says, then adds, "Follow me to my room."

Fortunio grabs Boxer's arm, trying to pull him away, in the opposite direction, but it's a game of tug-of-war he won't win.

As Boxer shakes off Fortunio, and follows Krysta, he says, barely audible on our feed, "I'm sorry I bailed on you. I... got lost in the desert."

"It's okay. I once got lost in Oakland, and, like, yeah, it was one of the biggest mistakes of my life, but now I know which exits not to take," Krysta tells him, placing her small hand, perfect for fisting, on his broad back.

"I appreciate your positivity," Boxer says sincerely.

"She just deemed an entire portion of California a nomad's land," Fortunio points out, catching up with the couple.

"Don't blame Oakland on Krysta Now," Boxer scolds Fortunio.

"Thank you, baby," Krysta responds, as she leads Boxer, and their third wheel- in the form of Fortunio- to room 652, then she keys inside.

We're vaguely horrified that when the door to the hotel room closes, the feed cuts to footage *inside* the room. The angle is such that the camera lens must be in the peephole, and at least the bed isn't in frame. This is a violation, but it could be more egregious, and this is how we calm our horror now- our mantra has become, *It could be worse*, which is usually coupled with a shrug.

Krysta rushes further into the room, and disappears from sight for a moment, while Boxer and Fortunio are standing in front of a flat screen TV that's bolted to the wall. They're both watching Krysta in the way people always watch Krysta- totally distracted, expressing minor physical awe- until she returns with a stack of paper that she hands to Boxer. "Here ya go. Since your copy probably blew away in the desert," she says, and Boxer takes the gift.

We can't see what's on the pages, so we have to go by Boxer's reaction. "The Power," he says, looking at the top piece of paper, and we can't tell if he's reading this aloud or if he's marveling at the fact that Krysta Now's collected thoughts fill more than a single page.



"We've been working on this script together for months. It's very top-secret," Krysta says to Fortunio, the latter point whispered.

Fortunio just stares at Boxer, incredulous, and he says, "Boxer, you're letting a whore pen your next movie?"

"It's mutually beneficial," Krysta declares, then begins her pitch, "Boxer is going to make his directorial debut with this project. And I'm going to co-star in the film with him."

Through laughter, Fortunio responds, "Keep dreaming, Princess."

"I mean, this isn't a dream. It's going to happen. We went on a research trip out at my friend's house on Lake Mead," Krysta says.

"Do you often leave your writing partners in the desert?" Fortunio asks, then scolds her, "I appreciate that you're trying to keep the lion's share of the royalties, but that's cold Krysta."

Krysta's faux-innocent eyes look to Boxer, and she says, "I didn't leave you. You left me."

"Why on God's green Earth would I do that?" Boxer bellows, mad at himself.

"You had this drug with you. This metal syringe. I asked you what it was but you wouldn't tell me."

"It wasn't mine," Boxer says, and even far from the camera, we can see his eyes go wide, and his hands rise, then he begins his finger tapping again.

"Dude, I watched you inject yourself in my car," Fortunio says, accidentally corroborating Krysta's story.

"That was yours," Boxer says.

"It doesn't matter whose it was. What matters is that I begged you not to inject yourself, and you looked me in the eyes, then defied me, and fled," Krysta tells Boxer.

"You didn't stop him?" Fortunio asks.

"Boxer, pick up that channel changer," Krysta says, then turns to Fortunio and instructs him, "Stop Boxer from picking up the channel changer."

Boxer pushes Fortunio in the chest with one hand, and picks up the remote with the other.

"Okay, point taken," Fortunio concedes instantly.

"I looked for you," Krysta assures Boxer. "There was this huge sandstorm. They evacuated all of the lakefront homes. So I left... and came

here, without you, but only because I had a show. I had made a commitment, and I keep my commitments, even when it sometimes hurts me.”

“What are the odds?” Fortunio says, and part of him has to accept that the universe may have a sense of humor about all of this because there are no holes in Krysta's story. It's to the point that we almost believe her too.

Getting close enough to Boxer that she can reach her hand up to his chest, Krysta coos, “It was fate that brought you back to me, Jericho Cane.”

Acting like Boxer isn't the only one with amnesia, Fortunio asks, “Who the fuck is Jericho Cane?”

“The lead character in *The Power*,” Krysta says, then offers the most clichéd description of all time, “Jericho Cane, is a no-nonsense cop who plays by his own rules.”

“Where have I heard that name before?” Fortunio asks.

Boxer shrugs, and says, “Don't look at me.”

Fortunio moves past it, and with the type of glee that springs up in the wake of a person embarrassing themselves and not realizing it, he says, “Krysta, please tell me about your character in the script.”

“Of course,” Krysta responds, “I am Dr. Muriel Fox.”

Fortunio repeats, “Too good,” three straight times, then asks, “Okay... Dr. Muriel Fox... may I speak to you privately?”

Boxer has begun to page through the script, so Krysta walks toward the door, getting bigger in our frame, until she engulfs it completely, then she opens the door and walks out of the room.

The camera feed returns to the hallway, as Fortunio pulls the door shut, puts his back to it, then quietly says, “Krysta, let's get one thing straight here. You're not an actress- you get paid to fuck. So if you're acting in there, cut it out.”

“I'm transitioning into running new business ventures,” Krysta says, without confidence.

“That's news to me, and I'm the guy who set up your old business ventures.”

“I'm not cutting you out here. I'll let you handle negotiating the rights to my poetry,” Krysta says, like this would be a comforting “get” for Fortunio.

“Listen, don't punish me further on this, it's hard enough to lose one of my biggest stars to... *The Power*?”

“Fortunioooo,” Krysta says with blowjob lips, “Remember, I’m also developing my own pop album, reality television show, clothing line, jewelry line, perfume, and energy drink.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard you mention that incessantly for the past year so let’s move beyond your career that’s spreading like a herpes outbreak between the cast of a CW show, and confront the fact that Boxer Santaros is a married man, and you’re vacationing with him during an election year. Are you being paid by the Neo-Marxists or are you just so politically isolated you don’t know that Boxer’s wife is Bobby Frost’s daughter?”

“I’m aware that he’s unhappily married,” Krysta confirms.

“Do you think the American public cares about happy marriages? I mean, Hillary fucking Clinton is running, that should tell you all you need to know. My concern begins and ends with the fact that Madeline Frost-Santaros’ mother has a massive network of cameras that she can watch people on, and if they follow us any more than they already are, we’re done.”

“Don’t patronize me. I know who Boxer’s in-laws are. I watch The Daily Show. I know everything about him,” Krysta says.

“As someone who watches comedy-news, I’m sure that you also realize if word gets out that the two of you are shacking up, you will become the news cycle, which means, at minimum, you’re getting a buttfuck of an audit on your taxes.”

Raising her perfect nose up, Krysta says, “I’m well aware of the repercussions, and it’s not like I’ve never been buttfucked before.”

“You’re clearly in this for the money. Is it blackmail? Or do you just want the publicity to help expand your empire?”

“I want everything,” Krysta declares, then adds, “And if you play your cards right, Fortunio- I’ll give you a piece of the action.”

“I already had a piece of the action,” Fortunio growls.

“You were right to use the past-tense there,” Krysta counters, “So, I’m thinking if you were counting on using me for money still, you’ll have to go along with ‘The Power,’ Mr. Movie Producer.”

Suddenly, Fortunio’s body language, and language-language changes, “I could get a producer credit? On a Boxer Santaros movie” he asks, visions of producer ass dancing in his head.

“A mainstream producer credit would look very attractive to the bright eyed and bushy tailed girls you try to ‘assist,’” Krysta points out, dangling a

carrot in front of Fortunio's nose, which he will grab, then give it to a girl so she can masturbate on camera with it.

"I'll help you with this, as long as I get that credit, and you don't completely give up on porno," Fortunio says, and he doesn't even wait for Krysta to agree to this- instead, he immediately begins planning, "We have to keep Boxer away from the internet as long as possible. The second he googles his name... he's going to figure out everything."

The man who was once totally against Krysta and Boxer colluding is now pacing the hall trying to keep them together.

"I'm going to be... his bodyguard," Fortunio decides.

"I want to take him home with me," Krysta says with a pout.

"I'll take him home."

"How?"

Fortunio shrugs, then says, "Carefully."

"How are you going to do it when you don't have an interstate travel visa for him?" Krysta asks.

"Maybe I do."

"You don't. And I know this because I bought the last two interstate travel visas from Karl, and he said you'd be pissed."

"Why'd you buy them?" Fortunio asks.

"Because I want to go home, and I hate to do it alone."

Fortunio winces when she admits this, then he asks, "How much do you want for them?"

"I don't want your money now. I want to accompany you and Boxer across the border, and I want to live rent-free in your house for as long as we have Boxer. I want that to be our home base because we have more research to do for The Power, and the time to do it is now. You need me and my lips that grip to distract him, and I need you to keep your lips zipped, so we'll watch each other at the house. We'll keep each other in check. I mean your plan is legitimately just, 'Keep him away from the internet,' which might as well be like, 'Keep him away from the bathroom.'"

"I don't think he goes to the bathroom. I don't think he even eats food. I think he lives off drugs," Fortunio says, offering all of this information up with the frustration of someone who doesn't know what to believe anymore.

The feed switches back to the interior of Krysta's room, and it must be shot from the oft-rumored viewer-cameras in all of those brand new Fluid

Karma enabled Smart- TVs because we now see the bed in pure HD. We were told that the TVs used an audio-only “listen” function for the voice controls. Most of the time, we couldn't find the channel changer for our old TV so we said fuck it, and just chose to believe Treer Industries x Sony regarding their statement. Again, our trust was betrayed, what a surprise.

Left out of all contract conditions, it seems Boxer took a shower, and now he sits, in a towel, reading the screenplay.

An interruption- in the form of a ringing room phone- causes Boxer to immediately look for an adult to walk into the room and pick up the line. When no one appears, Boxer inches his way toward the screaming phone, and after steepling his hands, tapping his fingers, and intensely staring at the receiver, he finally gets enough confidence to answer the call.

Going wide-eyed the moment he lifts the receiver, he asks, “Hello?”

The audio from the other end of the phone is crystal-clear on our feed, as a woman with a German accent says, “I'm calling for Ms. Now.”

Boxer's owl eyes scan the room, then he says, “She's not here at the moment. I'm visiting her room so we can work on our screenplay.”

At first, there's no response, then the German woman asks, “Is this... Jericho Cane?”

Boxer glances at the script next to him on the bed, then his face relaxes, and his voice drops a register, as he responds, “Yes, this is Jericho Cane speaking.”

The German woman, with the authority her accent provides, instructs Boxer to, “Stay with the girl. She is your only chance to set things right.”

“Jericho Cane” responds, “Understood,” then places the phone back in the cradle on the nightstand. The moment the handset makes contact, the feed clicks over, so that we're now watching an old woman, who must be the owner of that ominous German accent, as she puts her phone down in the cradle as well. This woman must be at least 80, and there's something vaguely familiar about her- like she's a long-lost aunt. Her gray bouffant hair, sagging jowls, and cherry-red lipstick all remind us of being a child, and having a series of older, world-weary, infinitely-knowledgeable grade school teachers. We feel we can learn from this woman, yet we also feel we would be a nuisance to her. She stands proudly in an office that has a vista window which overlooks downtown Los Angeles, and she taps her blood red fingernails on a conference table.

*"That is Inga von Westphalen. Baron's Mom. And the amazing view she's in front of is compliments of Treer Tower 1's Executive office."*

"Why's this footage so clear?" we ask, looking at Ms. von Westphalen in HD quality.

*"We get a clear feed because the von Westphalens don't care who sees what they're doing."*

"But if they can be seen, they can be stopped."

*"They disagree with that theory."*

"Why?"

*"Let's say- as a complete hypothetical- we watched them discuss the fact that they are going to poison the water supply. Tell me how you'll stop them."*

"Easy. It's just a matter of logging on to the internet and-"

*"-and you'll find that the internet is giving you a 'Page Cannot Be Displayed' message, but only after you type out your social media post about what's going to happen. That post doesn't go out into the world- the only person it reaches is Nana Mae Frost's USIDent compound located in the Caltrans building."*

"Fine, then we would call-"

*"-you get on your cell phone, and suddenly... all circuits are busy."*

"How would they know what was going to be said?"

*"Because you typed it, like a dipshit, on their internet system."*

"Okay, so we'll go back and not-"

*"-too late. You already typed it in this scenario"*

"Alright, then we'll go to one of the major TV studios."

*"How?"*

"You worked for one of them."

*"Okay, sure. How's that help you?"*

"There's a rental back at-"

*"-you get in your FluidKar that you rented, but it doesn't start because they've cut off the Karma-Loop receiver in it."*

"Alright, then... we..."

*"Then you stay on the roof with me and we talk about how fucked up things are, while we wait for the UPU2 raid."*

"This is a police state," we say, feeling profoundly hopeless.

*"It's an election year, go about stopping it then."*

"But the people you're talking about aren't elected officials. They're business people."

*"There's where they get ya."*

"Why weren't provisions written into the Fluid Karma contract to prevent this?"

*"Because it was your freedom or their green energy. You were willing to give up rights here and there. Just 'a little' surveillance, but only to catch the bad guys. Sure, that minimum wage security guy can pat down your lover's privates, but only to make sure the next guy hasn't wrapped his in explosives. Absolutely, scan my body in a cancer-shotgun of a machine, at least you'll also be scanning that scary looking man with the bath towel on his head. Our government overlooked the broad implications of small actions because you consented for them to do it a thousand other times."*

All of this hits us in a flurry, and we wince in mental pain regarding how completely short-sighted we've been.

*"Give 'em an inch, and they'll send you thousands of miles away to Fallujah."*

We feel subsumed by Pilot's melancholy world, so we focus on the screen, as Inga makes another call, and as soon as the line goes live, we know who she's contacting.

In a shrill voice, we hear Baron say, "Mother, I can't speak to you right now. We're preparing The Whopper to be transported to Utopia 3.

"Oh. I see. Okay," Inga sighs, and it's so universally mother-like that we realize across all cultures and generations, moms are using guilt as their prime communication tool with their progeny.

"I'm sorry, Mother," Baron relents, "Please continue."

"A man who identifies himself as 'Jericho Cane' is with Ms. Now at the casino," Inga says, then adds, "Her screenplay is becoming prophecy, just as we anticipated. I will continue to monitor her progress."

“Do we have a USIDent profile on the man who claims to be Cane?” Baron asks.

“I spoke with him directly.”

“What did he say?” Baron asks.

“Baron, I’m sorry, I have to go. I really need to review Krysta’s screenplay,” Inga responds, then after a pause, she adds, “Not so nice to be on the other end of that brush off, is it?”

“No, Mother,” Baron responds meekly.

“Show Serpentine ‘The Jenny,’” Inga demands, then, again, the phone is placed in a cradle.

Inga walks out of frame, and the feed switches to a wide shot of Ms. von Westphalen approaching a large digital lightboard display which runs the length of the wall opposite the window. On the left side of the lightboard, there are excerpts of some olde timey speak- we assume it’s from the Bible. We lean closer, and read, *“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things that are written therein: for the time is at hand.”*

On the right side of the lightboard, there are screenplay pages. Before we can see what the specific pages say, the camera feed switches back to Krysta’s hotel room.

“Why did we just get an establishing shot there, then nothing happened with the scene?”

*“Because that is the beginning of the Book of Revelation on the board, and we will have to read it.”*

We accept this homework, and make a mental note to look for a Bible in the nightstand at the motel tonight.

In Krysta’s room, Boxer Santaros is still alone, but his green hoodie is back on, as though he’s about to leave and disregard Inga’s demand. Boxer cranes his neck and looks toward the door, and when he seems to feel the coast is clear, he reaches into the pocket of his hoodie and removes a Treer syringe.

We can hear Krysta faintly, as though she’s yelling something at Fortunio in the hall. Boxer hears it too, and instead of leaving the room to help Krysta, he lifts the syringe up to his neck, then injects himself with half of the glowing red liquid. Boxer’s eyes go wide as he stares straight forward, into the lens of the camera we’re getting footage from.



After a lingering staring contest with Boxer, the feed switches back to Baron, who's leading Serpentine through an expansive-looking hangar. This seems to be a different hangar than the one where the SUVs are being stored. Piece-by-piece, we get to see this huge, and mostly empty space, the feed clicking from camera to camera as Serpentine and Baron make a silent march that ends when, in the far left corner of the frame, we see what looks like a blimp.

"Okay, Serpentine, open your eyes for your surprise!" Baron says joyously.

"My eyes were already open," Serpentine responds.

"Oh, of course... just checking," Baron says, then he points to the far left of the frame, "Here she is, The Jenny von Westphalen mega-zeppelin! Finally complete and ready for flight on this great nation's birthday."

From what we can see of this mega-zeppelin, it was modeled after the Staples Center, almost as though the designer had passed the stadium every day, and he or she felt its massive, paneled, curved window demanded a more impressive view.

Serpentine drops her cigarette to the ground and crushes it with her heel, then her heavily makeupted eyes behold the mega-zeppelin. "For so long da Americans funded aircrafts dey would never enter. Da only time an American would step foot on one of those aircrafts, was to be sent off to die. Dis will be da first mega-zeppelin that dey will step onto, and it will be worth their money," she declares.

"The question now, my dear Serpentine, is who will attend the first flight of The Jenny von Westphalen?"

Serpentine exhales out an answer, "Da worthiness of a potential passenger will depend on each person's worth."

Baron's eyes narrow, and his head cocks to the side, then he says, "That feels a little circular."

"It isn't," Serpentine assures him definitively.

"Now, Serpentine, my dream, I have one final surprise for you," Baron says, then puts his arm around Serpentine's slender middle, and leads her away from the mega-zeppelin.

When the feed hops to the next security camera, Serpentine arrives at a metal rack that holds at least a dozen dresses.

Sufficiently seduced, Serpentine searches for her ultimate party dress, reviewing each piece, one-by-one, from the left side to the right, but she

pauses when she arrives at a gasoline-puddle-colored snakeskin V-front bustier dress.

The feed cuts back to Krysta's hotel room, and Boxer's eyes are still fixed on the same point, as though he's in a trance. We desperately want to know both how much time has passed, and what Boxer is looking at.

Krysta Now steps into frame, blocking 50% of our view of Boxer, and she merely says, "Roller coaster," then reaches down and grabs Boxer's hand. With Krysta's touch, he can once again move, so he stands up, then Krysta pulls him out of the room, like he's a Radio Flyer wagon.

We watch on the security cameras, as Krysta leads Boxer out of the room, down the hall, into the elevator, then through the casino.

Boxer has his hood up, but he becomes visibly distracted anytime a slot machine hits.

Once they finally pass all this commotion, Krysta announces, "We're here," and we see that they're standing at the mouth of The Desperado, right where Fortunio saw Krysta's advertisement.

Boxer's wish is granted- he desperately wanted to ride the coaster, and Krysta is giving him this chance. Still high on Fluid Karma, his enthusiasm is muddled, and his reaction is childlike and hesitant.

At the entrance to the coaster, there's a Latina girl dressed in a white shirt and black pants, and she's folding up a sandwich board sign. Boxer briskly walks up to her, and without directly looking at him, the girl says, "I'm sorry sir, we just did our last ride, and we're closed for the night."

Boxer pauses, then reaches both hands up, and instead of tapping his fingers, he slowly lowers his hood to his shoulders.

The girl glances at him, then lets the sandwich board drop, and the clap of its collapse makes Boxer jump.

"Holy shit. Are you really you?" the Latina girl asks, starstruck.

"I have the same question," Boxer responds, concerned. He looks back to Krysta, who understands that she's needed, so she walks to his side, then makes a request, "Could there be an exception for my friend here? He can't really come down here during the day- what with the tourists and all."

The girl smiles politely at Boxer and Krysta, then whispers, "Let me talk to the coaster-tech to see if he can stay an extra ten minutes."

"Did he want someone to ride with?" Boxer asks, and the girl laughs, then scuttles off to get permission for one last run.

Boxer turns to Krysta, and marvels, "How did you know?"

"I get these visions. I saw you coming here from a hundred miles away. That's why I put my picture out in front of the coaster," Krysta responds, and she's too endearing for us to definitively make a ruling regarding if this is all bullshit or not. It certainly seems to not jive with the Lake Mead location scouting story.

The Latina girl reappears, a little more composed now, and she says, "Right this way, Mr. Santaros."

We see night-vision security footage of Boxer being escorted through a dark tunnel, then he arrives at the roller coaster, which consists of six carts that fit six people each.

The girl walks to the first seat, in the first cart, then says, "This is my favorite spot."

Boxer walks over to the cart, and once he crams his massive frame into it, he looks around, and asks, "Where's Krysta?"

The girl merely places the safety bar down, pinning Boxer in his seat, then says, "Enjoy your ride, Mr. Santaros."

Instead of a front-facing view of the track, the feed gives us a coaster-cam view that seems to be sourced from a camera affixed to the front of the cart.

Without a signal of any kind, the roller coaster begins to move, departing the platform as a prerecorded message squawks from an unseen speaker giving insurance information in a surfer dude cadence which attempts to make liability-acceptance fun.

The coaster leaves the building, and the night welcomes Boxer, then the track takes a nearly-immediate first drop. Boxer faces us- wearing an expression that's a mix of fear and euphoria, as the cart spirals around the building, the busy city whipping in-and-out of view behind him as he careens around the rails.

The coaster climbs another peak, and we can see Boxer's anticipation build. We hold our breath, as the cart begins its descent, and in a surreal moment, it feels like the background is moving, while the cart is staying stationary. Boxer's eyes go wide, but we remember that he's been doing Liquid Karma for seemingly days-on-end so we can only imagine what he's seeing.

Everything goes dark on the laptop screen, then- almost too suddenly- the feed shows Boxer back at the platform, the cart hissing to a stop.

After the safety bar pops up, Boxer remains seated, frozen. His hands are raised and he taps the tips of his fingers together.

We can see Krysta waiting at the edge of the platform, next to the coaster cart. There's sound on the feed, and we hear her repeat Boxer's name, twice, to no response, so she physically gets into the cart, stepping over Boxer, and takes a seat.

With worry and care, Krysta reaches over, and slides one of her hands between Boxer's dancing fingers.

Once again, Krysta's touch breaks Boxer out of his trance, and he turns, then looks into her eyes- totally focused, instead of alarmingly vacant. She waits for him to say something, holding onto him, bringing him completely into the reality they cohabit together.

Boxer swallows deeply, then tells Krysta, "I... bled through time."

"It's just a really short ride," Krysta assures Boxer.

"No... when I..." Boxer looks back behind him, into the dark tunnel, then his eyes return to Krysta, and he continues, "When I crested over the final drop, on the descent, my surroundings... they pulled away. It was like... the city was moving in the opposite direction that I was moving, then everything came to an abrupt stop... and all around me..."

"What was all around you, Boxer?" Krysta asks, appearing to take every part of this story at face value.

"There were... Indians on horseback."

"Which type?" Krysta responds.

"They had machetes."

Krysta thinks about it for a second, then says, "That's not really a helpful hint."

"They had feathers in their hair," Boxer says.

"Ah," Krysta says, then corrects him on his phrasing, "I believe the preferred term is 'Indigenous Americans.'"

"Yes. We were in America, but... before... us. The coaster had dropped... into this land- but I was still here, at the border. Around me was the desert landscape this casino sits on, but I saw it as it likely existed back at the turn of the century... the 20th century."

"Were you told anything when you bled through time?" Krysta asks, and her questions remain about the experience, not what Boxer was doing in her room before this trip.

"The Indians began to chant and raise their bows as they confronted my asynchronous presence. There were men on horses, and everyone got louder, angrier, surer that I was not a guest, but instead an intruder."

"I understand," Krysta says.

"How could that happen?" Boxer asks.

"You're addicted to Liquid Karma," Krysta points out.

"But I went... somewhere... else."

"You traveled through a rift in space-time to a partially actualized reality," Krysta informs him.

Boxer cocks his head to the side, like a dog hearing a strange noise. His posture gradually straightens, and he eventually gets the courage to ask, "How did I close the rift?"

"I don't know. What's the last thing you remember?"

"One of the Indians... pulling back on his bow... sending an arrow flying toward me... and it hit me right in the heart."

Krysta closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, then says, "You closed the rift by becoming the victim of a group of victims."

Suddenly, the feed cuts off, and drops us into darkness.

We look to Pilot, who immediately stands up, stretches, then walks to the edge of the roof.

We stay seated, desperate for more, and we ask, "Did your laptop battery die or something?"

*"We're Americans. We don't use batteries. This laptop runs off the energy field from the Tidal Generator, you know, like that phone in your pocket and the lights in the restaurant below."*

We get out of our seat on the turret, our ass feeling sweaty from sitting for so long, and as we approach Pilot at the edge of the roof, we ask, "So why did the feed cut?"

*"Because she doesn't want us to see more."*

"You keep saying she? Who is she?"

Pilot merely squints at the glow of the Tidal Generator.

"Why can't you answer that question?"

*"Because I don't want to get in trouble."*

"You won't. The information won't leave this roof."

*"Sure it will."*

Suddenly, we feel watched, in the same way that we were able to watch so many others.

"There's more story here. We didn't even find out what the screenplay is about."

*"If you wanna know, give me your e-mail address."*

We reach into our pocket and take out a receipt from the tourist store we went into near the Chinese theater where we bought a shirt that appears to be the Jack Daniel's logo, but is actually a souvenir California T-shirt.

We remove the pen we were carrying for autographs, then we sign our e-mail on the receipt.

Pilot remains at the edge of the roof, so we walk over to him, then hold out the receipt with our e-mail address on it. We immediately turn away when we realize that Pilot isn't marveling at the massive glowing Tidal Generator or Utopia 3- he's pissing off the edge of the roof.

Thoroughly embarrassed, we wait for Pilot to finish, then he turns to us and takes the receipt. It's not lost on us that we came up here for an autograph, and now we're leaving after signing something for Pilot.

*"By the time you get home, you'll have a full PDF of the screenplay. Read some of it, then be here tomorrow at 8 AM."*

"What happens if, come 8 AM, you find yourself alone up here?"

*"I guess we'll never know."*

We know, just as Pilot knows, that we'll be back, and we want to thank Pilot, but we're afraid to, so we merely ask, "Want to head to the bus stop together?"

Pilot puts his hands on his hips, and considers the offer.

*"Know what... I'll give ya a ride back to your hotel."*

We immediately feel like a burden, and say, "That's not necessary."

*"I want to."*

As we climb down from the hot yellow roof, we feel pleased that Pilot was able to say this so definitively.

Passing through the Mariasol, Pilot by our side, we get our first glimpse at how, even if he didn't have the scar, even if he wasn't wearing a uniform that demands respect, Pilot would draw all of the attention in the room, instantly. The energy his presence conjures doesn't feel how we thought it would. This is a freak show situation that's less outward-affection, and more distanced-leering.

We feel like we can breathe again when we step out of the Mariasol.

It's now the perfect temperature, and the crowds have thinned since this afternoon.

As we walk the pier, next to Pilot, we feel like it's our job to warn the tourists we pass of what is about to happen, but the troubling part is just how insane it would make us sound. We also don't want Pilot to be embarrassed by us. We tried to convince him, hours earlier, that there are so many people better suited to help him than we are. He appeared to feel otherwise, and we try not to prove him wrong. Thank God for America's footage of Texas that linked us inextricably to this complicated situation.

When we reach the lot where Pilot is presumably parked, he pauses for a moment.

*"Just wait until you see what I got."*

And we *do* see what he has.

This is a moment of 1950's era James Dean coolness from Pilot, and we can't help but nod like a moron then follow him to what is either a brand new FluidKar or a distinctly old gas guzzler.

Pilot places his hand on the hood of a spotless, fire engine red Pontiac with T-tops and a honeycomb grille.

As we get closer, we realize that this is a vintage car from the 1970's.

"Shit, Pilot. This car is authentic. How did you even-"

*"-don't judge me. I have my IRQ permit to operate it."*

"What's an IRQ permit?"

*"If you've served, then you get this distinction on your license that you can operate an old gas guzzler. It's a little 'thank you' for fighting a war over oil that we don't even need anymore."*

We stalk around the car, checking out its pristine condition. "This is incredible," we say, excited to see a car from a time we romance.

*"It's a 1977 Firebird Trans Am."*

"How did you get it?"

*"My dad."*

"But how did it..." we can't complete the question because the phraseology we keep coming up with is "survive the blast." Before we can create an embarrassing situation, Pilot gives us some history.

*"Dad wanted to get the interior redone. Finally saved up enough cash, then drove the car out to the New Mexican*

*border to this specialty shop. I followed behind him in our family van. We left the car there, then drove him back. On July 9<sup>th</sup>, he was supposed to pick up the car, but..."*

Pilot's voice goes out, and his hand covers his mouth.

"The interior looks awesome," we say, filling the silence, putting a palm on the warm hood. We're thankful we didn't pass up on the ride. It's clear Pilot is proud of this car, and it's amazing that he's willing to share such intimate insight into his life, in the same way we've received insight into Boxer's life.

Pilot pulls open the front driver's side door, then sticks his head in the car, like he's seeing the interior for the first time.

*"These seats do look awesome. Don't they?"*

"Absolutely," we say, making our way around the car to the passenger side.

Pilot hops in the driver's seat, then waits for us to get inside, so we accept his offer.

With our seat belt buckled- only then- does he turn the car on.

*"Where ya stayin'?"*

"The Motel 6 near LAX," we sheepishly admit.

*"I know it well."*

And with that, Pilot throws the car in drive, and we hit the road.

Desperate for some reflection, we look out the window, and we search for clues, one way or another, that the world is ending. We only find ads.

While stopped at an unusually long traffic light, we see a moving billboard for "THE JENNY VON WESTPHALEN MEGA-ZEPPLIN" which features various pictures of Zeppelins of the past, crashing and burning. Fiery wrecks fall to the ground in triumphant displays of man's failure, then their image is replaced by a murky background that surrounds an alien, hive-like structure. Bright lights bounce off an otherworldly arched glass ceiling. Purple structural supports run between the panes of glass like veins, giving the mega-zeppelin a sinister pulse. Below this, in boldface text, is, "AMERICA WILL RISE, AND NEVER FALL AGAIN."

Nothing about the ad provides comfort, but the tagline is rousing in its promise. It's such an anti-Neo-Marxist statement, that it could double as an Eliot/Frost campaign poster.

Out on the street, we're surprised that there are so many homeless people, and so many beautiful people in such a short proximity. Despite



this disparity, it's impressive how unbothered everyone seems. This is just another day for all these people, not one of their *last* days. We see travelers returning to their hotel room, sunburned and tired. We see workers returning from their jobs with their branded polos stained. We want to roll down our window and tell the travelers to spare no expense- make this the trip of a lifetime- because this trip could be all that's left of their lifetime. We want to tell the workers to become like the people on vacation- take as many vacation days as you can, because those days will expire soon.

It takes longer than we thought it would to reach the Motel 6, and we could only imagine how long it would have taken to catch two buses, then drive our rental FluidKar home.

Pilot pulls into an open spot in the small motel lot, and we thank him for the ride, then send him on his way. We stand in the lot, and watch as our only friend in California leaves in a car he's allowed to drive because the environmental tax he's putting on the world is nothing compared to what the world owes him in return.

As we step into the motel, we ask the skinny white guy at the front desk if we can borrow the tape dispenser that sits next to his coffee mug. He amiably gives it to us, and we promise we'll return it as soon as we're done "fixing something."

Once we're in our room, we tape over the peephole in the door, as well as anything that looks like a lens on our flat screen TV, then return downstairs to the desk and thank the guy for his hospitality while handing him his tape.

Exhausted from an overwhelming day, we decide to forgo dinner, and once back in our room, we go through our backpack and find a package of Oreo O's we bought at the airport.

Since the last thing we want to do is look at another screen tonight, we grab the stick connected to our blinds, then walk across our room, slowly revealing a giant billboard for some sort of orange alcohol drink that looms massively on the side of a building across the street. We've gone the whole day without a single drop of alcohol, and we also went an entire afternoon without being bombarded by advertising while we binge watched life. The clarity we feel is cleansing. Our mind is relaxed, despite the violations we've been exposed to. Without being hammered by advertising, and news crawls, and texts, we were able to pay attention to life, and it's terrifying what is happening out there. How predictable that the tools we thought

would keep us connected to the world, were actually distracting us from it.

We open our laptop, and instead of the click-and-stare ritual we've been cultivating since high school, we merely check our g-mail. Just as he promised, Pilot has e-mailed a screenplay.

We download the PDF, and we find that, against all odds, *The Power* really does exist. "By Krysta Now and Jericho Cane" appears under the title. We're only on the title page and we already have so many questions for Pilot- *Why does it say Boxer's character name, instead of Boxer's real name? Is this to protect the fact he's working with Krysta, until he can reveal the truth after the election? Is this so Boxer doesn't have to run this script by his team? Is it because Krysta knew that she would find a Jericho so the name is a placeholder? Did Pilot add this name so we'd ask him all these questions tomorrow morning and he would know that, yes, we are paying attention?*

To find some answers, we begin reading:

T H E P O W E R

BY:  
KRYSTA NOW  
and  
JERICHO CANE

**EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY -- DAY**

We descend from high above, into the CITY OF PALMDALE. The DESERT SIZZLES under an amber sky. HEAT RISES from the swollen vein of asphalt known as the 15 FREEWAY.

A POLICE CRUISER races toward the eastern horizon.

**INT. POLICE CRUISER -- NEXT -- DAY.**

Behind the wheel is law enforcement officer, JERICO CANE (30's). One of LA UPU2's finest. Tall... dark... handsome.

DR. MURIEL FOX (V.O.)

He was the one I'd always been  
waiting for. His name was Cane.  
Jericho Cane.

Jericho has a SIX-PACK of BUD LIGHT sitting in the passenger seat.

MURIEL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He was the kind of man that God  
forgot how to make... before *The New  
York Times* declared him dead.

(beat)

God... that is.

**EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY -- DAY**

Jericho pulls off onto an EXIT... and the cruiser winds its way down into the bowels of Palmdale.

MURIEL (V.O.)

Jericho was the kind of cop who  
didn't know how to obey the rules.

**EXT. PALMDALE INTERSECTION -- DAY**

Jericho turns on his SIRENS... running a red light.

In the intersection, A SOCCER MOM in a MINIVAN slams on the brakes, as Jericho passes her.

SLOW MOTION: Jericho winks at the soccer mom.

MURIEL (V.O.)

Rules are for nerds.

SLOW MOTION: The soccer mom swoons.

**EXT. PALMDALE RESIDENTIAL STREET -- MOMENTS LATER-- DAY**

Jericho pulls up in front of a STRIP MALL. He shuts off the engine and steps out into the hot sun... removing his wraparound sunglasses.

His eyes could melt steel. They rove across the storefronts- TARGET... BASKIN ROBBINS... PAYLESS- finally, his eyes come to rest on a club called FOX TROT.

**INT. FOX TROT -- DAY**

Jericho enters the FOX TROT club. FOXY GIRLS in skimpy outfits serve the food and drinks. Jericho winks at a passing WAITRESS who nearly rolls an ankle due to the distraction.

Across the club, Jericho spots the man he's looking for. His name is DETECTIVE CHUCK MACPHERSON (40's). He sits at the bar, nursing his second BLOODY MARY. When he spots Jericho, he flicks his fingers over his shoulder to shepherd Cane to the BAR.

Jericho sits down next to MacPherson.

JERICHO

You know, with all these camera phones, it's not a good look for two fully-uniformed UPU2 officers to be sitting in the Fox Trot.

MACPHERSON

Oh yeah? Fuck they gonna do?

This is the all-powerful nature of being a UPU2 in LA.

JERICHO

Alright, here's another question. What the hell are we doing in Palmdale, Chuck?

The WAITRESS who stumbled earlier slides behind the bar.

WAITRESS

I noticed that you gentlemen aren't being served. I'd like to rectify that.

JERICHO

I hope that your stumble earlier won't affect your Fox Trot.

WAITRESS

You'll just have to watch me very carefully when I trot on over to the tap to get you a Bud Light, on the house.

JERICHO

You're too kind... I don't think I've caught your name before.

WAITRESS

Jade.

JERICO

You're very kind, Jade, but Jericho Cane pays his tab in full, and his tip is always more than most bartenders can handle.

JADE

Luckily, I'm not a bartender.

JERICO

You're behind a bar.

JADE

But I'd like to be sitting on your lap.

MACPHERSON

Hey, Jade. We're on the clock here. Maybe hurry it up with those Bud Lights?

JADE

Coming right up, handsome.

Jericho winks at Jade, then turns back to his partner.

JERICO

You didn't answer my question. What the hell are we doing in Palmdale, Chuck?

Just then... the hollow drum beats of NEW ORDER's "RUINED IN A DAY" pump over the sound system, as SMOKE rises from the STAGE.

Time slows for Boxer, and MacPherson nods toward the stage beyond the bar.

MACPHERSON

That's what we're doing in Palmdale.  
Take a look.

Moments later, MURIEL FOX (18) [KRYSTA NOW] emerges from behind a curtain. She's petite, yet powerful. Her nose seems too perfect to not have been sculpted by a surgeon, yet it's natural. She seems too pretty to be a stripper, yet here she is, on stage. Everyone's life is better now.

Jericho takes out his wallet, ready to pay tribute to this beautiful girl.

Muriel's moves are so smooth- her body moves like liquid, yet it's toned in all the right places.

*She could have been a ballerina if things had only gone differently for her.*

Muriel locks eyes with Jericho, and she's drawn to him, as though the fates demanded it.

MACPHERSON

Her name is Muriel. Muriel Fox.

JERICHO

I wasn't aware that foxes were an indigenous species to Palmdale.

MACPHERSON

*That is a desert fox, Jericho. The most dangerous kind of fox.*



CLANK! A BUD LIGHT slams down on the bar in front of Jericho. Jade notices him staring at Muriel, and she doesn't seem hurt by his fractured attention.

JADE

I think it might be love at first sight.

Jericho doesn't even look at Jade.

JERICHO

Am I that obvious?

JADE

No.

(leaning in close)

But *she* can read your mind.

This causes Jericho to turn toward Jade, but she's already making her way back around the bar to resume her waitress duties.

JERICHO

Did you hear what she said to me?

MACPHERSON

Oddly enough, it's true.

JERICHO

That fox is also a mind reader?  
Bullshit.

MACPHERSON

It's not bullshit. In fact, I didn't meet Muriel here. I met her at UPU2 HQ... where she told me exactly who committed a 187 that I was investigating.

JERICHO

If she can do that, why's she here?

MACPHERSON

Because she can also do that.

Muriel is now fully nude, gyrating on a pile of money.

The New Order song comes to an end, and instead of leaving abruptly, Muriel's beautiful body is allowed to be appreciated by everyone stage-side as she picks up the bills she earned. It's not awkwardly silent in this moment because the crowd is on their feet, applauding.

MACPHERSON

You don't get that type of reception for solving a murder. Not in 2008. You want to be appreciated? You do *that*.

JERICHO (Sarcastic)

I'll get my banana hammock ready.

With a stack of bills in her hand that's as thick as one of those stupid fucking *Harry Potter* books, Muriel's clear heels clack over to the edge of the stage, then she bends down.

MURIEL (Whispering)

I knew you'd come.

JERICHO

I didn't.

MURIEL

Not yet you haven't... Would you boys like to take this conversation somewhere a little more... private?

**INT. FOX TROT -- MANAGER'S OFFICE -- DAY.**

Muriel now sits behind the DESK in her office located in the back room of the bar.

Jericho and MacPherson are glancing around at the BOOKS, MAPS, and HISTORICAL ART that fills the room.

Muriel removes a PINK CRYSTAL from her drawer and presses it against her palm.

MURIEL

The threat still exists.

MACPHERSON

You kept saying 'threat' on the phone, but I didn't actually hear you reveal the crime that was being committed, Ms. Fox.

MURIEL

Doctor Fox.

MACPHERSON

Pardon?

MURIEL

It's Doctor Fox now. I graduated in May.

MACPHERSON

Un-fuckin-believable. A stripper really was stripping to pay her way through school.

MURIEL

We're going to continue with that theme, and we're going to do

MURIEL (Cont.)

something that's never been done before.

JERICO

I'm in.

MURIEL

Don't agree to something before you've heard what the buy-in is.

MACPHERSON

What are we going to do?

MURIEL

We're going to show up at the scene of a crime... before the crime happens.

MACPHERSON

That was good advice that you just gave Jericho. This is fucked.

MURIEL

Unless you want a very important child to get riddled with bullets by terrorists, you'll work with me on this.

**INT. UPU2 CRUISER -- DAY**

Muriel now sits in the back of a gray UPU2 CRUISER, as Jericho speeds down a residential street in Palmdale.

MURIEL

Take your next left.

Jericho turns left, onto another residential street.  
The scenery reflects in his wraparound sunglasses.

MURIEL

STOP THE CAR!

Jericho slams on the breaks.

**EXT. PALMDALE RESIDENTIAL STREET -- NEXT -- DAY.**

The cruiser comes skidding to a stop in front of a two-story SUBURBAN HOUSE.

Leaving the cruiser, Jericho and MacPherson follow Muriel to the front walk.

MURIEL

In ten seconds, you will hear a  
scream.

MacPherson rolls his eyes, but his eyes eventually settle on his WATCH.

Muriel's eyes remained locked on the front door of the house.

*All is silent, for now.*

MURIEL

Five... four... three... two... one.

Just then... a WOMAN SCREAMS from inside the house.

JERICHO

That's incredible.

MURIEL

I promise I'll do my job, now promise  
me you'll do yours.

Jericho and MacPherson both nod, confirming they will.

The SCREAMS grow ever louder... as the woman's  
dramatics are countered by a MAN's yelling.

MacPherson reaches for his radio.

MACPHERSON

MacPherson here. We got a domestic  
dispute. 1400 Wanito Place. Backup  
requested.

Jericho walks to the front door, MacPherson flanking  
him, and he hammers out a closed-fist knock.

JERICHO

UPU2! Open up.

The fighting continues inside the house.

MACPHERSON

'mam, we can help you if you answer  
the door!

After another round of knocks, yet another shriek comes  
from inside the house. Jericho takes a step back.

JERICHO

On three. One... two... three.

Jericho levels the door with a swift kick.

**INT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- NEXT -- DAY.**

Jericho and MacPherson rush into the house. Blood-  
curdling screams can be heard from the kitchen to their  
left.

**INT. 1400 WANINTO PLACE -- Kitchen -- NEXT -- DAY.**

A MARRIED COUPLE is in the middle of screaming at each other, chest to chest. Their names are RICK MCBRIDE (30's) [ROLE OPEN] and TAWNA MCBRIDE (20's) [ROLE OPEN].

Rick shoves Tawna hard against the kitchen counter.

RICK

YOU'RE A FUCKING SLUT! THAT'S WHAT  
YOU ARE! A FUCKING SLUT!

TAWNA

I FUCKED YOUR BROTHER LAST NIGHT, AND  
I'LL FUCK YOUR DAD TOO!

RICK

YOU FUCKING BITCH. I'LL KILL YOU.

JERICHO(O/S)

NO, YOU WON'T.

Rick turns around and notices the UPU2 in the kitchen. He immediately reaches for a GUN on the counter and aims it at Jericho.

RICK

CHECK THIS OUT, PIG!

Jericho has no choice. He FIRES off around into Rick's HEART.

Rick falls against the counter... sliding to the floor.

Tawna looks down at her mortally-wounded husband. She's in shock.

Suddenly... a BABY begins to cry from the next room.

TAWNA

CALEB!

Jericho follows the fleeing mother into the next room.

**INT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- FAMILY ROOM - NEXT. -- DAY.**

Tawna attends to her son CALEB who lies in a crib, as Jericho approaches her carefully, unsure what else could be in the crib as well.

JERICHO

LA UPU2! Step away from the crib,  
'mam.

TAWNA

FUCK YOU!

Jericho raises his gun.

JERICHO

Step away from the crib or your son  
becomes an orphan.

MacPherson appears next to Jericho.

MACPHERSON

Lady, don't touch that  
baby!

TAWNA

But he's sick! He needs me.

The humanity in Tawna's eyes seems to sway the  
adrenaline filled UPU2s.

Boxer and MacPherson lower their weapons, then  
hesitantly approach the crib to make sure the baby is  
alright.



**INT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- FAMILY ROOM -- LATER ON**

CORONERS are now removing Rick's body from the house. MacPherson is talking with some other UPU2 who have arrived on the scene.

Tawna is sitting on the couch across from Jericho and Muriel.

MURIEL

Tell me about your baby, Tawna.  
What's wrong with Caleb?

Tawna wipes a teardrop from her cheek. She glances over at the crib... where the baby sleeps peacefully.

TAWNA

He ain't had no bowel movement yet.

JERICHO

Today?

TAWNA

Ever.

JERICHO

And how old is he?

TAWNA

Six days. He's never had one... not  
in the six days he's been alive.

Tawna lights a cigarette, takes a drag from it, then blows smoke in Jericho's face.

MACPHERSON

You been feeding him?

Tawna (Sarcastic)

Oh! Is that what you're 'posed to do with one of these little things?

MURIEL

Have you taken Caleb to see a doctor?

TAWNA

We ain't got no health insurance besides that shit from the VA.

MURIEL

Do you or your husband have any medical conditions that could have led to Caleb's condition?

TAWNA

Rick has a medical condition.

BOXER (concerned)

What is it?

TAWNA

He's got a bullet lodged in his chest, because of YOU!

MURIEL

Is there anything in your genes you might have passed onto your son? Did you take any unique substances while pregnant?

TAWNA

I was good, but Rick... he was involved in some medical experiments in the military. Could be something messed up with his sperm.

MURIEL

Did his sperm have an unusual taste?

TAWNA

Fuck if I know. I always spit it into a T-shirt near the bed.

MURIEL

That's disrespectful.

JERICHO

I think you're lying to us, Tawna. I think you like to swallow and you're concealing what his sperm tasted like. Did it taste like... government secrets?

TAWNA

Fuck you, Lenny. Don't you have a rabbit to go crush?

JERICHO

I'm actually not offended by that. I'm mostly just impressed you were able to make that reference on the fly.

The reality of the afternoon begins to hit Tawna, and she starts to sweat. She takes a drag off her cigarette, and when she does... a LOUD FART erupts from Caleb's crib... and the ENTIRE HOUSE BEGINS TO VIBRATE for several seconds as though an EARTHQUAKE is occurring.

We close the script. We simply cannot read anymore.

*The Power*, while being almost willfully unreadable, does clarify a few points.

1. Krysta Now must have also ghost-written most of the dialog in her adult films.
2. The information on Pilot's laptop screen features real, genuine moments, and what we're watching is not a work of fiction. We know this because there would be way more farting in it if it was scripted.
3. We need to return to that turret tomorrow, and face Pilot Abilene, then we can make fun of this super shitty screenplay together.

II-

FINGERPRINTS - JUNE 30<sup>TH</sup> 2008

Before we return to the Santa Monica Pier, we take a FluidTaxi to Vine, then get in our rental car so we can drive to Hermosa Beach. This is where Krysta said Fortunio's house is, and we want to be familiar with the locations that are being discussed because if we have to chase someone down- if we have to save a life- every second will count.

Hermosa Beach turns out to be about 40 minutes South of the Venice Beach Pier, and by the time we park, we can only take a cursory walk around, use the bathroom in a bar called "The Poop Deck," then hop back in the rental, and cruise on the 1, past LAX to Venice Beach.

We return to the pier, cut through the Mariasol, and by the time we reach Pilot, he's been watching us for so long from his scope that he doesn't even greet us. Our presence was acknowledged as he tracked us down the pier, his rifle pointed directly at our chest.

"How we doin' on time?" we ask.

Pilot looks at his watch.

*"Only three minutes until the feed pops up."*

"Jet lag," we respond.

*"Ain't have to make an excuse for being early."*

Despite the fact we know there's a short period of time to have this conversation, we can't help but reveal, "We read some of the screenplay."

*"How far did you get?"*

"A baby just farted and caused an earthquake."

Pilot smiles at this.

"Like, seriously, what the fuck?" we have to say, because we feel we just made a statement that demands further comment.

*"You're going to be even more confused when Krysta starts talking about her abilities."*

"Shouldn't you use air quotes when you talk about her 'abilities?'"

*"No. She's seen the future."*

"That's not the future. Pilot. That screenplay is retarded. Severely."

*"On the surface."*

"Is there anything besides surface on that screenplay?"

*"Absolutely."*

Pilot's answer is so definitive that it frustrates us. We imagined this conversation being so different. It was supposed to be a pow-wow of universal-disgust regarding the travesty that a talentless pornstar and moronic Hollywood actor have birthed. Instead, Pilot is somehow treating *The Power* almost with a certain reverence. At this point, we remember that he too is an actor.

Before we can start an argument, Pilot's laptop screen makes a sharp electrical noise as it turns on, and we see the view of Krysta's hotel room where the bed is in frame.

"Oh no. He fucked her," we say, staring at the naked couple lying in bed together, Krysta's arm stretched across Boxer's bare chest.

*"Was there any doubt? You don't need to be a Muriel Fox-style clairvoyant to have seen that coming."*

"There are implications to this beyond just Boxer getting a freebie."

Again, Pilot doesn't react as he should to this information. We needed his agreement, after which we could discuss how to break up this couple immediately. Instead, we merely receive:

*"Oh yeah?"*

"Yeah," we spit back with urgency, "With the Neo-Marxists radicalizing a portion of the Democratic party, and the left's tendency to eat itself alive, for the first time in a long time, California is a swing state, and there was already a scandal that marred the first primary here. The Republicans have a real chance of winning Cali right now, but it's fragile. All it would take is either Krysta or Fortunio leaking infidelity rumors about Boxer to really fuck this election up."

*"But it's California. We understand the game."*

"You understand it from an actor's perspective, but this is from a political perspective. Madeline Frost-Santaros is happily married- as far as the entire world knows- hell, as far as she knows- so if information regarding Boxer cheating on her was to surface, that would shatter the narrative. The multiplier on this scandal is huge- cheating with a well-known, social-climbing pornstar would exacerbate this heavily. The Neo-Marxists are foaming at the mouth for this stuff. They have a drop box in The Poop Deck- and none of that is a euphemism. They're hungry for this

type of information... and... you understand all of this because you already know what's going to happen."

*"Keep that same keen eye and critical view regarding all of this. What I know doesn't matter- the key is going to be what you know. That's how we're going to crack this egg before the chicken coop goes up in smoke."*

We nod at this, then we begin to view Pilot as a resource for us to be able to understand what we're seeing in a deeper and more meaningful way. "So it's the 30th of June for us, what day is this footage taking place on?" we have to ask.

*"Fortunio did mention that yesterday was June 28<sup>th</sup> when he picked up Boxer."*

"Right, but that was yesterday, when time jumps were happening on the feed, so how far did we jump into the future?"

Pilot doesn't laugh at this question, more or less, he marvels at it.

*"That's actually good. Stay in this frame of mind."*

We've clearly made an impression on this soldier with our timely arrival, attention to detail, and adherence to commands.

Now that we have a little more confidence in our ability to comprehend what we're watching, we focus on the screen, as Boxer and Krysta have a quiet conversation during this moment of alone time.

With true sincerity, Boxer says, "I'm sorry about leaving you at Lake Mead."

"It's okay. You're an addict," Krysta responds, then her voice pitches up, and she begins to sing, *"Addicts act erratic, and it's tragic / Let's rehab it."*

"Are those lyrics to one of the new songs you're working on?" Boxer asks, excited by this.

"I already recorded it."

"Did you write it about me? Do I need to go to rehab?" Boxer asks.

"No," Krysta says, quickly, "I'll help you change your life."

"Where do I start?"

"You need to stay off the internet, and devote yourself to *The Power*. It's a vehicle for you, in many ways. I know that you might bleed again, but you won't do it in my presence, do you understand?"

"I understand," Boxer says, ashamed of himself, yet seemingly determined.

"And I want you by my side, Boxer Santaros," Krysta says.

"I want to stay by your side, Krysta Now."

Krysta sits up, then reaches over to the nightstand and grabs her copy of *The Power*. "What you need to understand about this screenplay is..." she trails off, like she's reconsidering her statement before it's complete.

"Hey, you can tell me. We wrote this together, and we need to stay on the same page."

"Moments from this screenplay are going to start happening to us, maybe not word for word, but you will see the truth to our words, and I don't want you to be alarmed."

"I'll protect you," Boxer says, with a Jericho Cane level of bass in his voice.

Krysta's almost wincing, admits, "The problem is, right now... I think that *I* need to protect *you*."

This reality sits between the two lovers for a complicated moment.

"I'm going through the most helpless time in my life right now," Boxer admits, "I'm so powerless, with the exception of *The Power*." He laughs at this, maybe to cover the real emotion that this stirs within him.

"You've lived a charmed life, but also a complicated one," Krysta says, "You don't want to go online and read about it, because some very sad things happened to you, and this is a second chance. Do you understand? Your drug abuse might be due to past trauma, and I'm no Dr. Muriel Fox, but I think that maybe, just maybe, if you no longer carry that past trauma, you will no longer abuse drugs."

"Is this a second chance for you too?" Boxer asks.

"I don't get that luxury," Krysta admits, a pout quivering on her lip, "I went too far on my first chance, and no matter what... every subsequent chance I get now, there's still going to be the scars from the past. I suppose, in a way, I need to keep my old life as part of who I am because otherwise it will manifest itself as this second, evil version of me, which would create even more confusion. You could think you're standing next to me, when you're standing next to a monster. You can escape, but I can't. My past is a scarlet letter that I'll wear for the rest of my life."

Boxer puts his arm around Krysta, then says, "It's going to be you and me. Together. Until the end of time."

Before we're able to see the physically perfect, mentally affected couple share a kiss to seal their pact, the feed switches to show us a tranquil stretch of water. We look behind us to ensure that we're not watching live



footage of the Pacific, and luckily there are no mutual landmarks between the screen and our background.

The camera is jostled, and it looks like a minor earthquake is happening, so we listen for a fart, but everything is recontextualized when a white dude with a shaved head sits down in frame, and we hear typing. We realize that we're watching footage from a webcam, and the "earthquake" was this guy jostling the table when he sat down. After three spurts of frantic typing, the man gets up, wobbling the table again, and he disappears from frame. Whatever he was looking for, he didn't find, and he left in a hurry, like he shouldn't have been using the laptop in the first place.

The footage from the webcam is practically a still picture of an unknown body of water, and we need this moment, because while Krysta was speaking with Boxer about escaping a complicated and nasty past, in our periphery, we heard Pilot gasp in a sharp intake of air, that he tried to cover by groaning as he leaned down to pick up a book with a thin leather cover that was sitting at his feet.

Pilot cracks open this book, almost like he knows the lull onscreen is going to continue. Out of the corner of our eye, we glance at the cover of the book, and we see that it's The Bible. We don't address this because there's something icky about confronting an injured soldier who has found solace in the spiritual. Bible study is better than him jamming a needle in his neck.

We focus on the calm water on the screen.

We can see a bit of the shore and we realize we're watching a lake.

This is Lake Mead- it has to be- everyone has been talking about this place so often, yet the only water we've seen is at our back, as well as that lake at the far end of the maze where the park ranger was killed.

Finally, the dude with the shaved head steps back into frame.

"Who's that?" we have to ask.

*"That's Ronald Taverner."*

Ronald isn't facing the camera. He has his back to us and he's staring out at the water.

While Pilot reads his Bible, we watch Ronald, as he watches the lake, and just when we start zoning out, a couple walks into frame and reignites our attention. The couple is older, both of them are maybe in their mid-sixties.

"Who are they?" we ask.

Pilot doesn't look up from his Bible.

Ronald asks the older couple, "So when are you going to tell me what this is about? This isn't a sex thing, is it?"

The older man shakes his head back and forth, then says, "I'm your father, Ronald. And this is your mother. You don't remember us?"

The older woman offers Ronald a warm smile.

"No, I don't," Ronald says, then begins pacing.

"It's us, Ronnie," the woman says.

"I- uh- shit- I... I can't remember anything," Ronald admits.

Ronald's dad steps forward and puts a hand on his son's shoulder to get him to stop pacing.

This is now the second person that we've seen on these screens that can't remember a damn thing, meanwhile Pilot can remember what happened on these screens and he's never seen the footage before. This asynchronicity is enough that we want to pick up a Bible, and disregard what we're watching too.

The concept of ownership regarding personal memories becomes more captivating to us than it's ever been before. Memories are stored in the brain. The brain runs on electrical impulses. If you could capture those electrical impulses precisely, could you send a copycat version of them to someone else? Is there a way for an electrical current to transfer from one person to another, and along with it, transfer a memory? Is the Tidal Generator pumping out signals that reprogram our mind based on the requirements of those who control this new world? What if the Clinton campaign is wiping the memories of Republican voters so that they simply don't show up at the polls? What if Boxer was their test subject?

We fear this concept, or maybe our brain does, so when interesting stimulation in the form of a heavily tattooed man with a rainbow mohawk appears on the screen, we feel gratitude that this man is wearing the costume of an attention whore.

Ronald's dad, instead of scowling at this parental nightmare, motions for the guy to join him at his side, while explaining, "Now, Ronald, this is someone who can help you. His name is Jimmy Hermosa, and he's going to administer an injection to your neck. It will make you feel better."

"Jimmy Hermosa," we snark, and Pilot shakes his head no, at which point we realize we're making fun of a guy because his last name is also the

name of a place, and we're doing it next to a guy whose last name is also the name of a place. Perhaps we should pick our battles better.

Jimmy disappears out of frame, then returns with a metal Liquid Karma syringe, but this time, the LED lights and liquid in the syringe are both yellow, instead of red. Ronald stares at the syringe with a concerned interest, almost as though he doesn't recognize it, yet does understand it's not something to be welcomed.

"Relax," Jimmy says, "This is all natural. It's from the Serpent Trench. Do you know what that is?"

Ronald predictably shakes his head no.

Like a salesman skilled in selling only one thing, Jimmy Hermosa explains, "Imagine it like a big snake around the core of the Earth. What Treer Industries has done is tap into that snake, and they've begun pumping out this red liquid that was inside the snake- something called Liquid Karma- then they put it in these little tubes."

"That's not red. It's yellow," Ronald says, maybe to prove that his brain isn't totally mush.

Jimmy laughs, "You ain't ready for red. This is a lighter mix. It's mellower. You won't bleed."

"I'm not letting you put that weird shit in my body," Ronald tells not only Jimmy, but also the old couple.

"It's from the Earth. If God didn't intend for us to have it-"

"-he would have put it somewhere where we couldn't get it... like the center of the Earth," Ronald finishes Jimmy's statement for him.

In a gruff voice, Jimmy declares, "You're wrong. Do you know what they call this stuff? The elixir of God."

"The elixir of God?" Ronald asks, his lip snarling.

"Don't be afraid," Ronald's mother says to him.

Ronald stares at this old woman, almost like he's trying to locate a single memory of her so he can trust what she's saying.

Noticing his chance, Jimmy lunges forward and jabs the needle into Ronald's neck.

Ronald closes his eyes- first in pain, then in quick acceptance.

This yellow Liquid Karma doesn't drop Ronald to his knees like the red would. He remains standing, but seems wobbly.

"See, honey? You're fine," the old woman coos.

"And, you, lie," Ronald says, slowly, like he just took a bong rip.

"Now follow us downstairs, there's something we want to show you," Ronald's dad says.

This is not a plan that Ronald is able to protest, so Jimmy leads him down into the hull, with Ronald's parents following closely behind.

The camera feed switches to a black and white security camera inside this... yacht? The group enters a kitchenette area, then Ronald's dad walks over to a drawn red curtain.

"That Liquid Karma was for your own good," Ronald's dad says, gripping the curtain, "We know how you've been feeling, and the last thing we want is for you to have another panic attack. We recognize that you've been through a lot, son."

Ronald's mother puts her hand on Ronald's shoulder, then the curtain is pulled away.

We lean forward and squint at the screen because on a cot is... what looks like *another* Ronald Taverner? This "duplicate" has the same shaved head, the same good bone structure, and the same beady eyes- but this version of Ronald has had his hands and feet bound with rope, and his mouth covered with tape that wraps around his head over, and over, and over again.

Ronald's eyelids flicker at this surreal moment, and he looks down at his hands, like he's trying to confirm that he's still in his own body.

"I... don't... understand," Ronald says, remaining focused on his palms.

"He's your twin brother. His name is Roland. Roland Taverner."

"You guys got really creative with the names," Jimmy sarcastically grumbles.

"What... happened to him? Why is he... tied up?" Ronald asks, nearly hyperventilating, even with the yellow Liquid Karma in his blood.

"Because of you," Ronald's dad says, "You were driving him out here to Lake Mead to meet us... but you got caught up in a massive sandstorm. It was only through a GPS tracking-chip that we eventually found the two of you."

"But... he's tied up," Ronald says, jabbing a finger in the direction of the man on the bed who's making muffled noises.

"We had to tie him up so that we could keep him safe," Ronald's father admits.

"You said... it was my fault, though," Ronald points out.

Ronald's parents exchange glances, then his mother, in a soothing voice, explains, "Three years ago, your brother was drafted into the army and sent to Fallujah. After the first year, your father was able to make special arrangements to get him discharged from service so he could come back home. When he returned to California, he joined the UPU2 squad in Hermosa Beach. It was good for him, it was an easy transition to go to an Urban Pacification Unit, but they're infringing on our rights, and doing as they please, totally unchecked."

"Oh no. Are these two old assholes both Neo-Marxists?" we ask Pilot.

*"I know, right? It's like just when you thought the left couldn't get any worse at dinner conversation, they go ahead and get on the Neo-Marxist train."*

"Why aren't you watching this?" we have to ask, as Pilot remains focused on his Bible.

*"I will."*

"This seems important."

*"It's lies."*

"What do you mean?"

*"You don't really buy any of this, do you? Think about it."*

"Who knows what conclusions will come if—"

*"I need you to think about it if we're going to achieve our goal of- ya know- preventing the world from ending and all."*

"Roland and Ronald don't seem like twins," we state.

Pilot puts down his Bible for the first time.

"They both have the same haircut. Identical twins never get the same haircut. The Shining ruined that shit for them," we point out.

*"Agreed."*

"And we have information that Ronald doesn't have."

*"Everyone does."*

"No. The information we have is from this feed. We know that Boxer Santaros also got caught in the storm. That's where it all began yesterday."

*"And?"*

"And Boxer can't remember anything, now Ronald can't remember anything, then there is a second Ronald, named Roland here."

*"So what you're saying is..."*

"That the storm fucked these people up," we state, in the simplest terms possible, and this is enough for Pilot. He doesn't reach for his Bible, and instead, he becomes engaged regarding what's on the screen. It's almost like we inspired him to watch everything closer.

On cue, Ronald's dad says, "We have to work with the Neo-Marxist underground. We're the last remaining vestiges of the true Democratic party, as it was intended by all of the great Liberals before us."

"I have no idea what that means... but if you guys are part of it... I bet it sucks," Ronald states, with a gasped resentment.

Jimmy immediately puts Ronald in a headlock for this comment.

"Let... go... of... me," Ronald gulps, as he struggles for his freedom, at a handicap due to the yellow Liquid Karma.

"Now son, we don't want to have to tie you up too," Ronald's father warns.

"See! You said *I* did this, but *you* did it," Ronald responds, struggling.

"Don't be scared, this is a lot to take in," Ronald's father says, "You need to understand, last week, government operatives discovered that Roland was leaking classified information to the Neo-Marxist underground- so we had no choice but to orchestrate his kidnapping before they took him into custody."

Jimmy lets Ronald go, as Ronald's mother explains, "Due to his PTSD, your brother has become mentally unstable so he must remain on Liquid Karma and hidden from plain sight or he could go rogue and the Eliot/Frost team would buy his influence. They have deep pockets. If the government finds him... USIDent will administer a powerful truth serum and once they get inside Roland's head... the repercussions will be catastrophic. It would blow our entire operation."

"Quite frankly... the scariest part of all of this... is not finding out that I have an identical twin... but instead that... I might share genetic code with you two lunatics," Ronald says.

"Fine, fine," Ronald's father responds, "We won't bother you, we'll leave you out of this- on one condition- we need you to return to Los Angeles, and impersonate your brother."

Ronald, head spinning, seems to see this as a way out, so he steps forward, and asks, "So... I go back to LA as Roland Taverner... and you keep the real Roland here... like a common criminal? Tied up... on a fucking houseboat?"

"This is a *yacht*, you little shit!" Ronald's dad points out, with offense.

"How could you assume... I'd just be okay with this?" Ronald asks, his voice pitching up.

"Because you owe it to your brother," Ronald's dad responds.

"Because?"

"Because the military has a policy where they won't draft a set of twins. Roland went to war while you stayed at home playing video games. You owe this to him."

"I have no idea... what's going on... all the time," Ronald says, almost in a panic.

"Your amnesia is a blessing. A truth serum won't work on you. If you assume his role as a UPU2 officer... you can carry out his mission without risk."

"Fine... I'll do it. Untie him," Ronald demands.

"No," his father responds.

"This is fucked up."

"Ronald, don't use that language," his mother scolds.

"Fuck you, lady. Untie him," Ronald demands, seeming clearheaded, and ready for conflict. In a split second, he receives the conflict, in the form of Jimmy pricking him with a syringe filled with Liquid Karma. We can't tell what color it is because this footage is all in black and white. Whatever color it is, it does its job, knocking Ronald on his ass like a punch.

Roland Taverner kicks his tied-together legs in protest of what's happening.

Jimmy looks to the older couple, and Ronald's dad says, "Let's dock the yacht and transport these guys."

Our head is spinning from what we just watched, so when the feed switches to Fortunio, we're relieved. This appears to be a security camera at the valet of the hotel, and we can't tell if the feed has audio or not because we're tapped into the cell phone call that Fortunio is making.

"Hey, Ash... yeah... crazy stuff... hey, remember when you told me that I should buy a MiniDV camera, just in case I saw a celebrity out on the street- so I could get some quick footage, and make an easy buck?" Fortunio asks, "Well, I actually have an interview with none other than Boxer Santaros, and-" Fortunio stops talking abruptly, as he's pushed by a skinny Mexican in a blue do-rag. The conversation ends as Fortunio's phone flies out of his hand and slides across the pavement.

“Yo, dawg! I knew you'd be here, dawg!” we hear over the feed, and the voice is so nasally and put-on that we realize that Fortunio wasn't pushed by a Mexican- he was pushed by one of the biggest wiggers we have ever seen outside of a suburban public high school.

Fortunio walks over and picks up his cell, then says, “You fucked up my phone, Martin.”

“Can you hear me now?” the wigger- who might be Martin- says, then he laughs manically at this. “Like the commercial,” he adds when no one joins him.

“Yeah, I got it,” Fortunio assures him, doing his best not to make direct eye contact.

Instead of apologizing, Martin starts ranting, “The crew been sayin' that you dodged me, but I was like, 'Nah, kid! Not Fortunio. That's my dawg,'” Martin hits his sunken chest, rattling the fake-looking chains around his neck, “I says to them, I been down with Fortunio since high school, back when they called dude, 'Fartunio' which was dumb as hell, dawg, but funny because you did have those stomach issues. Anyway, my G, I thought, I know this bitch ain't gonna skip town, but my dawg says he seen you at the valet, gettin' that nice-ass car outta the garage. I says, 'Nah, dawg, he was probably just drivin' out to catch some sun in the desert.’”

“I was,” Fortunio says, still not looking at Martin, even as the conversation progresses.

“Good because otherwise I woulda drove your ass out to the desert- with no sunscreen, dawg- zero S.P.F., except for the S.P.F. of super... painful...fuckkk,” Martin says, losing steam as he can't think of another complete version of the acronym.

“You mean the only SPF I'd have is a Shotgun Painted Face.”

“Yeah, dawg! Damn, that was good. You a smart muhfukkah, which means I know I'm gonna get paid, this A.M.”

“I'll pay you when we get back to Hermosa Beach. We're headed there right now.”

“Sheeit, so am I. My dad needs the car back by 3 PM. This Vegas trip was a special exception because I've been building trust with him, ya heard?”

“I have not heard that,” Fortunio says, answering Martin's verbal crutch which doubles as a rhetorical question.



There's an awkward silence, then Martin asks, "So where the fuck is my money?" but the question doesn't sound threatening, it sounds like Martin had forgotten the answer.

"I told you—"

"-nah, you ain't tell me. You ain't tell me nothing, and that's—"

"-a double negative," Fortunio interrupts.

"You're double negative... in the... money-having column," Martin counters.

Fortunio sighs as he looks back toward the hotel, then it's almost as though he puts together what's transpired in the last twenty-four hours, and he asks, "What if I get you Liquid Karma?"

"Aw, shit, how a guy with fat titties like you get a connec who can cop Liquid Karma?" Martin asks.

Fortunio almost balks, but he needs to negotiate, so he says, "A friend noticed my great tits, and that started our connection."

"Ah, word. A Vegas story as old as the strip. Get yo' hustle on, Mr. C-cups," Martin says, then raises his fist, and Fortunio reluctantly fist bumps with him, then tries to steer the conversation away from money or drugs or his tits, by asking, "So what have you been doing out here?"

"Mostly just what we talked about. Lookin' at titties and making deals based on how nice a person's udders are," Martin says.

"You can take the boy off the titties but you can't take the titties off the boy," Fortunio muses.

"I'm svelte, dawg. Ain't no titties on me. You on the other hand," Martin says, then he hefts one of Fortunio's man-boobs.

Fortunio giggles, then looks mad at himself for this reaction, and says, "Ya know, when God gave the first man titties I really wish he didn't give us the reaction of giggling when they're touched."

"Hey, man. Don't question J.C. or you fin' to be D.O.A."

"Noted," Fortunio says, and he's about to walk back into the hotel, when Martin says, "It appears we've neglected to stipulate when the fuck I get my Liquid Karma," and we smile because there's a decent chance that this was Martin attempting to sound professional.

Fortunio pauses, then says, "My guy's in LA. I'll make a run out to his place tomorrow. Stop by the house this week, and I'll hook you up."

"Dawg, you lucky as a muhfukkah that I'm an unscrupulous drug dealer who will make concessions in order to get more drugs, otherwise I would

shoot your tits right off,” Martin declares.

“Show me your gun, Martin,” Fortunio responds, unafraid.

“Show me your titties, faggot,” Martin says, then he literally moonwalks out of the conversation.

The feed hangs on Fortunio, who watches Martin with concerned amusement, and once he's out of Martin's swatting distance, Fortunio looks down at his phone, and he's about to press one of the buttons, but he shakes his head in disgust, and we aren't sure if this is regarding his interaction with Martin, or due to the fact that Martin saved him from selling out his new friend, Boxer Santaros.

The feed switches back to the yacht on Lake Mead, but we're no longer getting footage from the yacht. Now, we watch from a rifle sight, and our gunman seems to be on the roof of a building that faces a marina parking lot. There are numerous possibilities regarding who could be shooting this footage, and we won't question it, unless the cameraman also starts shooting people. Roland and Ronald Taverner are both on the boat, as well as their sketchy parents, as well as the obviously bad-news Jimmy Hermosa, who, seemingly, is named after the place where Fortunio lives. Honestly, any of these people could take a bullet in 2008 America and it wouldn't shock us, nor would it be a great loss.

The sight eventually settles on a body covered in beach towels which is being moved from the yacht, out to a Treer pickup.

A spunky little white woman who has the type of braids a pasty girl might get while on vacation in the Caribbean is helping Jimmy and Ronald's mother get the body onto the truck.

Ronald follows behind them, his father guiding him toward the pickup.

It's totally silent on the feed, so we can't hear what's being said, so we're at the mercy of believing the plan remains the same. It probably doesn't matter too much because Neo-Marxists have literally zero follow through abilities- unless it's regarding demanding sponsors drop people they deem to be bigots- so for this whole conspiracy to continue past 3 PM today, someone is going to have to either say the N-word, or make a factually accurate statement like, *Marxism is a murderous ideology responsible for mass-death*.

The moment that Ronald is forced by his father into the front seat of the very same Treer truck his twin brother is now lying in the covered bed of, the feed switches over to the vehicle's dashcam.

We begin to wonder how a truck that isn't on could be transporting these images, then we remember this is a FluidKar so it can transmit whatever is necessary, whenever it's necessary, because the power is always radiating in the air.

Ronald seems aware of the full-on sketchiness of what he's gotten roped into and the Liquid Karma that was used to pacify him no longer seems to be controlling him to a greater degree.

Ronald's parents wait at the front passenger window until Ronald rolls it down.

"I'm taking this ride so I can get back to LA, and help Roland. That's where it ends," Ronald tells his father, then adds, "You're not going to get me to join your creepy cult."

"All we're asking of you is that--"

"--and another thing, I don't think I hurt my brother. I'm really tempted to go back there and ungag him so--"

"--damn it, Ronald. Act like a man for once in your life," Ronald's mother yells at him, and Ronald glares back at her, telling her sincerely, "You people are in grave danger, and you can change your ways now, or be consumed."

We hear a crazy woman yell, "Taverners! Go. I'll handle it. Go!" and after about five seconds, the white girl with spring break braids appears at Ronald's open window. She checks to make sure his seat belt is buckled, then she says, "You have a friend in me, Ronald. I also think people with yachts are cunts. We have that in common. That is our bond." After this declaration, she disappears.

Ronald looks back toward the bed of the truck, where we can hear his brother kicking and thrashing.

"Thank God she saved Ronald from those crazy Neo-Marxists," we say, then Pilot turns to us, with an eyebrow raised.

*"That girl has a UPU2 officer bound and covered in beach towels in the bed of her truck, and you're somehow looking at her as a savior?"*

"So the Taverners are still in trouble?" we ask timidly.

*"Sure are. That girl that you're thanking God for is Zora Carmichaels. She's a Neo-Marxist who runs their local HQ here. All day long she's got guys in her compound reviewing anonymously submitted footage because she'll*

*publish anything and everything that bolsters her politics, unless she can use it for blackmail. In her compound they're focused on two things- destroying Capitalism and dethroning God... but in between, there is also a lot of poetry writing."*

"Oh, wow, all of that sounds like the worst."

*"Sounds that way to everyone, except them."*

We see that Zora is now in the front seat of the Treer truck, and she makes eye contact with the dashcam, almost like she's checking to confirm it's recording, instead of suspecting her rights are being infringed upon.

Ronald has calmed down, and as they pull out of the lot, he says, "Hey, thanks for... diffusing that situation."

"It's fine I hate my parents too," Zora remarks matter-of-factly, "It's one of the tenants of Neo-Marxism."

Ronald smiles at this, then he's handed what looks like a credit card.

"They gave me your interstate visa," Zora says.

Ronald studies the card. There seems to be a fingerprint on it.

"This is Roland's card," he points out.

"Would you look at the time, we have got to kick it up a notch," Zora says, gunning the engine. We wait to hear a tire being shot out, but the moment never arrives. Whoever had their sight trained on this group seems to have no problem with Ronald uniting with Zora.

The feed stays with the duo- or rather, trio- traveling in the truck. Zora seems to be on a mystery substance that's the polar opposite of the yellow Liquid Karma, and she practically bounces in her seat as she drives like a stereotype of a woman- merging without checking her mirrors, changing speeds erratically, and just now she declared, "Let's get some tunes going in here," then turned on her emergency flashers. We make these observations without ever seeing the dashboard. We could hear the flashers ticking.

After a beat of silence, to make small talk, Zora asks, "So, have you ever *Parent Trapped* anyone?"

Ronald squints, seemingly trying to locate this term in his depleted memory, then he says, "Honestly, I feel trapped anytime I'm with my parents."

Zora laughs manically at this, then takes her right hand off the wheel and raises it, "Up high for that one, Mary Kate."

“Why did you call me Mary Kate?” Ronald asks, completing the high five, not leaving Zora hanging.

“For fun,” Zora says, yes-anding herself, “Your brother is Ashley.”

“My brother is Roland.”

“Your brother was a UPU2 so his name is shit. We just call him Roland as a nickname.”

“Why does being a UPU2 make him shit?” Ronald asks.

“Oh, let's see, well, these UPU2s are sanctioned and funded by the United States Government and they act on information by a new project called USIDent. See this harmless looking thing in the dash?” Zora's finger temporarily obstructs our feed, “That's a camera. We're being watched. Say, 'Hi,' and when you do, look directly into the camera so your retinas can be scanned.”

Ronald shakes his head once, then says, “Lady-”

“-Zora.”

“Zora, I need to know what I'm about to be wrapped up in.”

“The UPU2 are a fascist organization- a dangerous organization- and they're committing horrible atrocities. Innocent black men are being killed. Homes are being invaded without a warrant. Private information is being sold. The system is self-destructing,” Zora haphazardly fear-mongers.

Ronald nods at this, then asks, “What's UPU mean?”

“Urban Pacification Unit. Or as I like to call it Urban Pussification Unit, but then my friend Teri gets mad because she's a militant feminist, and all you really need to know about feminists is they get mad, all the time, endlessly, so I try to cool it with the fun names for UPU.”

“What's UPU1?” Ronald asks.

“What's that, dear?” Zora asks.

“If there's a UPU2, what's UPU1?”

“Mall cops,” Zora says.

“And UPU3?”

“S.W.A.T.,” Zora says.

“UPU4?”

Zora's eyes light up, and she says, “INTERPOL and also something called CLITORI. Isn't that fun?”

“Not really,” Ronald responds flatly, then asks, “UPU5?”

“UPU5, right now, consists of the queen cunt, Nana Mae Frost.”

“That's a lady?” Ronald asks, not up to date on his slang.

“Oh, this ain't your run-of-the-mill lady. This is a sadistic ice queen. She's taken over the Patriot Act surveillance and she's expanding out USIDent Caltrans, which is causing a bit of a row between her and Inga von Westphalen, who housed the precursor to USIDent in Treer Tower 1.”

“Is there a Treer Tower 2?” Ronald asks, clearly aware of the duplication that seems to be abound.

“No. That's why she's pissed. Nana Mae was supposed to give them a fat government contract for Tower 2, but then Bobby Frost's adviser, Vaughn Smallhouse said that it would look a lot better if they used an existing building for USIDent. I sort of feel like no matter what they build their house out of, they're still both a bunch of little pigs *and* the big bad wolf. Claiming safety, while committing atrocities.”

Ronald stares out the window, away from the dashcam, and he asks, “Has my brother committed any of these atrocities you're talking about?”

“No. Your brother has been compiling evidence of these atrocities, and reporting back to us. He's a mole. He works for us.”

Ronald, almost whispering, asks, “You're admitting all of this in front of the camera?”

“At first, we were really careful about it, but you can't charter a yacht every time you need to discuss doing something righteous,” Zora says, and this is why USIDent always wins. In the end, people get lazy... comfortable... careless. We seem to remember someone- maybe it was Ted Bundy- saying that after you do some crazy shit over and over again, without getting caught, you get more confident, you get sloppy, and eventually you get to the point where you forget where you put the pipe wrench. That is certainly not a man we quote often, but in the situation we're in now, it feels oddly appropriate.

“So I'm going to be working for both you, and the UPU2?” Ronald asks, and this is nothing short of a confirmation that he's willing to take his brother's place.

“Yes. You'll work for both of us, but I assure you that working with the Neo-Marxists is the better gig,” Zora responds.

“How's the pay?” Ronald asks.

“We pay in freedom and equality,” Zora responds, trying to make it sound good.

“That seems like a shitty pay scale,” Ronald observes.

“You'll be a great UPU2 guy with that attitude,” Zora counters.

What follows is a very long, very uncomfortable silence where Zora perks up three different times like she's going to say something, but she somehow musters the restraint to swallow her discussion topic each time. We wonder why the feed hasn't clicked over, until Ronald finally says, "Maybe what you're telling me about my brother is true, but if I find out it isn't, I'm going to become the polar opposite of my brother. This will be the last time that a Taverner is tied down and unable to call the shots."

Only after this humorless threat is made does the feed switch over, to the living room of a beach house. We must be getting information from a camera in a flat screen TV because the footage is clear, and we can see an entire living room, as well as a staircase which leads down to a lower floor. We can't see the beach, but we know this is a beach house because it's painted that sky blue that most beach houses employ to hide the fact that they're six minutes from a thriving concrete metropolis. We study the walls and see a familiar picture- it's a framed black and white photograph that we believe is called "Metroman" and was taken by Steven Poster. It's of a train station, or maybe it was taken on a train car, and in the center of the frame is a decrepit, evil-looking man. He glares at the camera, head cocked, as he realizes that he's been discovered by the camera. We know nothing about this man, beyond his appearance, but we're instantly aware that he is a problem. We make judgments on-sight, the USIDent way. This photograph is familiar to us because it was also in America's house in Texas. The dualities increase.

Over the feed, we hear a door open, then an electronic voice says, "Welcome home, Mr. Balducci, and... two... guests."

Fortunio walks up the stairs, and stretches his arms as he stands next to the Metroman photograph, then he heads toward the sofa, to relax in that pure way which only seems possible when returning home.

Boxer and Krysta climb the stairs, shoulder to shoulder, and the fact that they're holding hands feels a little sad to us. We can't tell if Krysta is holding onto Boxer because she's afraid he'll leave, or if she's holding onto him because she believes she's the one who will save him.

The couple sits down on a black leather sofa located on the opposite side of the living room from Fortunio.

Now that he has home field advantage and the issue of crossing state lines is over with, Fortunio turns the screws, saying, "So, Krysta, I don't think I ever got the story of how you two met."

"On a plane," Krysta says, without pause.

"Where to? Where from?" Fortunio continues to challenge her.

"NY to LA," Krysta quickly responds.

"On a plane," Fortunio restates, to himself, then points out, "Krysta, you don't fly first class. How did you strike up a conversation with a guy like Boxer? He certainly would have been in first class, what with his—"

"-movies and all," Krysta interrupts, to keep the Frosts out of this, and she pushes forward, "We noticed each other."

"Did you approach him or did he approach you?" Fortunio continues to grill her, but he does it in such a casual way that Boxer doesn't seem offended or suspicious regarding this display. In fact, he almost seems grateful for the information he's getting.

"I approached him," Krysta declares, selecting the most believable path.

"What was your opening line?"

"Can you help me?" Krysta says.

"What did you need help with?" Boxer asks.

"My baggage..." Krysta responds.

It's silent in the living room for a very long time. Fortunio got what he wanted and also received something he didn't expect. He gets up from the sofa, and claps his hands together, then says, "Alright. I'm going to go check on the router. We have this great Fluid Karma field, that my piece of shit Netgear seems totally uninterested in acknowledging. That's like half the reason why I took the Vegas trip. It's a dead-zone in here."

Krysta nods at Fortunio with a quiet appreciation, because she knows that he's going to unplug his router so Boxer can't google himself.

To stave off the curiosity he no doubt has, Krysta turns to Boxer and says, "Okay, I'm going to give you a crash course in 2008," then she reaches into her purse and takes out a pair of glasses. We immediately notice the glasses don't have lenses in them, which means they're porno props.

"You're going to be my sexy teacher?" Boxer asks, responding to the glasses on an instinctual level.

"Yes. I have lots of experience with that dynamic. I've been a sexy teacher over ten different times, and also a sexy student like forty times," Krysta says, giving a mini career retrospective.

"Continuing your education, like any good educator," Boxer says, not judging her at all.



“You’re lucky to have me as a teacher. I’ve been studying the Earth and its people because I need to be up-to-speed on current events,” Krysta explains, then whispers, “Don’t tell Fortunio, but my talk show is now appearing in select markets on CTV.”

“You’re great at talking,” Boxer assures her, “And your show is outstanding. I could do without the red lighting, but I guess that’s part of the theater of it all.”

“No. They don’t let me get my tits out on this show. It’s very serious.”

“I understand,” Boxer responds, but he seems a little disappointed.

“Alright, so I’ll tell you all the major topics in America, in 2008, so if someone asks you a question, you can bring up any of this information, then just seem outraged about it, and no one will catch on regarding your memory troubles,” Krysta prefaces, then begins, “Food prices, across the globe are going up, and there are about one billion malnourished people in the world right now.”

“We should help them,” Boxer says, but Krysta shakes her head, and informs him, “The problem is, Americans have become afraid of non-Americans. Remember that Bowie song ‘I’m Afraid Of Americans,’ er- shit, sorry- of course you don’t remember- regardless, there’s this song called ‘I’m Afraid Of Americans,’ and it’s been remixed to be ‘I’m Afraid Of Non-Americans’ and there was a lot of controversy about it because people are saying it promotes nationalism, but then there’s a small amount of outrage because the girl who sings it was alleged to be Canadian. Eventually, we all just agreed that she hates herself, like most popstars, so it was a happy ending and it’s still okay to sing along with the song.”

“Why are we scared of people from other countries when we’re a country made of people from other countries?” Boxer asks, then pauses, before giving up with a, “Nevermind.”

“Why did you bail on your question?” Krysta asks, going from the teacher to the student.

“Because...” Boxer squints, “...when I bled through time, on that roller coaster, I faced the indigenous people that first settled this land, and they pointed their arrows at me, and I saw they were scared of me.”

“So you’re saying that this isn’t a change?” Krysta asks.

“I have the benefit of that moment to know it isn’t. It’s a founding principle of this country to be scared of the outsider.”

"And the outsider isn't helping their cause," Krysta says, "We're being targeted. Bombs were detonated in Abilene and El Paso."

Boxer holds up a hand, then asks, "Are those places in America?"

"Well, Texas might be trying to escape from us, but for now, yes," Krysta confirms.

"Who did it?"

"The Taliban. They're these comically evil bad guys from the Middle East. They took down the Twin Towers too. You should have seen those towers. They were pretty freakin' nice."

"Where were they?"

"New York City. Across the country," Krysta says.

"I must have seen them, since we met on a flight from New York City to LA," Boxer theorizes.

"They were gone by then. When we were in the airport, there were all sorts of new rules specifically because of what happened to them."

"So nowhere in America is safe anymore?" Boxer asks, horrified.

"Meh, if you live in the Midwest, you're totally safe, unless a hurricane picks up your house or one of your family members shoots you," Krysta tells him.

"Let's run away to the Midwest," Boxer says, standing up.

"Aw," Krysta coos, then grabs his hand, and gets him to sit back down, "While that is the least romantic thing anyone has ever said to me, I know it's coming from a good place so that's how I'll regard it."

"What else is happening?" Boxer asks, and Krysta seems willing to continue because he hasn't even gone bug-eyed yet, or reached for his Liquid Karma.

"Dick Cheney recently issued an ultimatum to North Korea."

"What, did he threaten to send them all of Lynn's unsold CD singles?" Boxer snarks, and Krysta giggles at this, then says, "Way to go with the topical reference, babe!"

"Fortunio played me her dirge," Boxer admits.

Krysta puts her arm around Boxer and they stare at a point to the right of the TV, which we assume is a window that faces the beach.

"You see that water out there?" Krysta asks, "It looks nice from here, but don't go swimming out there, ever. Since we're kinda close to the Tidal Generator, there's this thing called Red Tide that you need to avoid. I mean, I know what that sounds like, but I assure you that it doesn't have to

do with girls perioding in the ocean. It's not that gross, and federal health officials say the Red Tide isn't dangerous to beachgoers, but they do recommend a shower after swimming, which, like, what type of animal doesn't shower after swimming in the ocean anyway? The main problem with Red Tide is that, even after that shower, the infected are reporting increased impulses. Scientists are looking into it, but it's not like there is a Red Tide fun-run yet so the shit isn't a priority."

"And to stop it, they'd have to turn off the Tidal Generator, right?" Boxer asks.

"Yeah, and that will not happen anytime soon. As Baron stated, Fluid Karma is proof of the principles we saw at work in the ocean. As long as the waves continue to crash, and the Serpent Trench is unsullied, Fluid Karma will exist."

"But... how's it work though?"

"For a transport mechanism, Fluid Karma works via the principle of quantum entanglement. Particles thus entangled will behave identically--"

"-hot damn, I have already stopped listening. The motion in the ocean powers cars. I'm going to leave it at that," Boxer says.

"How the fuck did Krysta just come up with that answer?" we ask.

*"There's a segment on her show about it."*

"Let's see, what else..." Krysta says, placing a blood-red nail to her puffed lips, "Britney just put out a really good album last October, um, oh, and some brave soldiers are set to depart for Syria and they're saying goodbye to their loved ones out on the beach today."

"But if we don't need gasoline anymore, why are they going there?" Boxer asks.

Krysta shrugs, then says, "Maybe just to piss the Neo-Marxists off. Plus I think they've switched to making opium which is like gasoline for our drug-hungry bodies."

"Wait, who are the Neo-Marxists?" Boxer asks.

"Oh no," Krysta says, then she decides to explain it like this, "Have you ever met someone that, on the surface, seems to have good intentions, but the more you get to know them, the more you realize that every position they take in their life is totally about them? That they've either lost control of their life, or never had control in the first place, so they find it necessary to force their beliefs on everyone around them, in hopes that somehow their warped worldview will line up with how the world actually is?"

"No. I've never met anyone like that," Boxer says, sincerely.

"You will," Krysta responds, promising something ugly.

"Does the government do anything about these people?" Boxer asks, then gives his opinion, "We should contain them all in one place and just call it Bummer City."

"We already have that, but we call it 'Portland,'" Krysta responds, then she mentions, "The government is having trouble tracking the Neo-Marxists right now because instead of using the USIDent free internet we all have- you know, what Fortunio left to go fix- they use this different network that runs in tandem to USIDent."

"What's it called?" Boxer asks.

"USIDeath.org."

"These people seem like dickheads," Boxer accurately presumes.

"I guess what you need to understand is that we're living in a tricky time right now, and maybe a couple of the things that the Neo-Marxists care about *are* important. I mean, in addition to those plane rules I was telling you about, there's this thing called The Patriot Act which has been recently bolstered to enable the government to keep overreaching tabs on citizens, even to the extent of censoring the internet and using fingerprints in order to access computers and bank accounts."

"So if they wanted to..."

"...they could erase you," Krysta presumes Boxer's question, then answers it.

"Did they take my memories?" Boxer asks, genuinely hurt he could be betrayed by his own country.

"I don't think so, babe," Krysta says to him, and once she notices that Boxer is growing pessimistic about the world in 2008, she switches gears, and says, "Oh, and in other news, outside this very house a week ago a Hermosa Beach woman brutally assaulted a UPU2 officer with an oversized dildo."

Boxer grimaces, then asks, "Krysta, why would I need to know that?"

"I don't know, I thought you'd want to hear a 'feel good' story."

"Why would I feel good about that?"

Krysta thinks about it for a moment, then says, "I guess it was more of personal interest to me. It was nice to hear about a brutal assault with a dildo that, for once, wasn't on one or more of my holes."

"Man. What a year," Boxer sighs, his head obviously spinning.

"And... there is one more thing," Krysta admits.

"What is it?"

"You don't have to cut off your dog's balls anymore- they've made dog birth control."

"I see."

"The dogs seem really happy about it, but dogs seem really happy all the time so it's difficult to really judge the impact it had, if any," Krysta notes, and with this, the feed cuts, and the laptop screen shuts off with a zap of power. We look to Pilot for guidance.

*"Hm."*

"Hm?" we counter.

*"This means one of two things..."*

"Those two things being?"

*"Either we get brunch and a bathroom break today, or what we need to see is in my rifle sight."*

"But I thought you know what happens?" we ask.

*"I know what happens when there are images on the laptop screen, when there aren't... I'm lost until they come back."*

We look out to the beach, and people are misbehaving, but not enough to warrant Pilot's intervention. We can't help but ask, "Are you going to have to shoot someone, do you think?"

*"Ya."*

We get out of our seat, and take a couple steps away from the turret, then ask, "Do you want to get brunch?"

Pilot leans forward, and puts his undamaged eye up to his sight, then the turret begins moving, as an electronic voice announces its rotation. We stand back as a 180-degree scan is performed by Pilot, and once he seems satisfied, he gets off the turret.

*"Let's go. I'll eat anywhere besides the Mariasol."*

"But the Mariasol is super convenient, and we can get back here fast to make sure we don't miss anything," we point out.

Pilot grabs the laptop, then pulls it off the stand.

*"We're watching a laptop, which, you know, is portable, and can be put on one's lap."*

"Just now realizing that," we admit, and once Pilot has his Bible and his laptop, we climb down from the roof.

As we make our way through the Mariasol, which is bustling with the regular brunch-rush, a woman screams, "Pilot! Father my children, both current and future," and we suggest, "Maybe we should get us some to-go meals, and we could eat somewhere in the shade."

We don't get an answer to our suggestion because Pilot has stopped walking, and is now taking a picture with an overweight Dominican girl.

*"Grab us some burgers and meet me back on the roof."*

We see that a semicircle of vacationers is forming around Pilot, and we don't know when the feed will flick back on, so we accept our mission.

We leave the Mariasol, and quickly walk the pier, which is dense with purposeless mouth-breathers. It's weird to see these tourists, and instead of feeling like part of their pack, we feel separate from them. It's certainly possible that this sensation is due to the fact that all those people believe they're just visiting here, while we know that there's a very real chance that we'll die here. Maybe that's what a home is- a place where you live, that you could imagine staying for the rest of your life. That sentiment does erode when you think about the hundreds of thousands currently stationed in a foreign war zone.

In the interest of getting back to Pilot as quickly as possible, we find a burger place that has no seating so everything is made-to-go. We get four bottled waters, and four burgers, with two orders of crisp greasy fries.

As we return to the pier, carefully balancing our food, we see Pilot on the staircase of the Mariasol, and he's using his Bible as a backboard while signing an autograph for a girl in an Angels baseball cap.

When we're within earshot of our only friend in California, we hear a kid say, "Thanks, Pilot. You're like... my hero."

*"Nothing heroic about me. Just a man placed in a series of wild situations who did everything he could to stay alive."*

"Living through those situations and coming out on the other side is heroic, I think," is the response we hear as we climb the stairs.

*"Maybe you're right, kid."*

In a near-collision, the child rushes past us on the stairs, and when we reach Pilot, he seems frozen in the moment.

We lift the food, and we're about to suggest that we find some shade when we hear the electronic zap, and we know that brunch will be served on the roof.

Pilot looks down at the laptop screen, which shows us Krysta walking somewhere.

*"Seems we will be having a working lunch."*

Knowing that there are no other options, we formulate a plan to get through the Mariasol, which involves Pilot carrying all the food because it will keep people from casually stopping him.

The plan kinda works, and the Mariasol diners are mostly respectful.

To get the meals up on the roof, we climb up first, then Pilot hands us the containers and bottles of water, one-by-one.

We return to the turret, the laptop goes back on the stand, Pilot sits back behind the rifle and does a quick scan of the beach, and once all is calm again, Pilot does the sign of the cross, and says a prayer for the food. He thanks God for our arrival. We echo his amen.

Formalities out of the way, and entertainment on the screen, Pilot starts eating like he was a guy that has still been eating military rations, even after he returned home.

In a moment bursting with pure American pleasure, we watch on the laptop as Krysta Now makes her way between the tables of an outdoor cafe, and we chomp down on our burger and fries.

Krysta sits down across from a hot blonde girl, and the angle of the security camera gives us a pretty good look at this girl's face. She has a pure, girl next door look to her, except her tits are big enough that her hotness crosses over from innocent to porno. Her blonde hair ends at her shoulders, and she's wearing a tight white dress that's very obviously a porno-nurse costume she didn't change out of after shooting a scene today, or she's meeting up with Krysta, then going to set.

"Oh, shit. Is that Sheena Gee?" we ask, but feel certain in our ID.

*"That girl? Is that Sheena Gee? I... wouldn't know."*

Pilot almost keeps a straight face, but eventually gives in and laughs. Apparently, we have a lot of the same internet interests.

"What's the 411, hon?" Sheena asks, then sips from a tall pink drink.

"Sheena, babe, some s.h.i.t. has gone down," Krysta says, her voice barely audible on the feed because it's a hissed whisper.

"Wait, why did you just spell 'shit?'" Sheena asks.

Krysta looks at the crowd of people who are trying to pretend they aren't ogling her, and she says, "I don't want such crude things coming out of my mouth with everyone around us."

"On a full set, I've farted out cum, which landed in your mouth, then you swallowed it. If you can do that with a crowd watching, you can rattle off a swearword," Sheena points out.

"Aw, I remember that. ATM Withdrawal 22 was such a fun set," Krysta says, warmly embracing the nostalgia, then she reaches across the table and grabs the drink in front of Sheena and sucks some of it down, as though she was trying to get the taste of the scene out of her mouth.

"Okay, so dish on this s.h.i.t. that's going down," Sheena prompts, but it might just be so Krysta doesn't finish off her drink.

"Well," Krysta says, then leans forward, "I'm fucking a very famous action star."

"Aw, good for you," Sheena says, not impressed.

"And I rocked his cock so hard, I gave him amnesia," Krysta adds, exaggerating so she can get the reaction she clearly wants.

"Maybe he's just cum-drunk?" Sheena suggests.

"No, I know what cum-drunk looks like when I see it. This guy has had no memory for days."

"So where'd you leave him?"

"He's at Fortunio's," Krysta whispers.

Sheena, obviously part of Krysta's inner pussy-posse, asks, "Weren't you at Wild Bill's this weekend doing your ho-etry?"

"Yeah, I brought this guy back, like a souvenir."

"Give me his name," Sheena demands.

"I could, but then Nana Mae Frost would kill you."

"It's Boxer Santaros!" Sheena whispers with enthusiasm.

"Shh," Krysta hisses.

"How'd you get over the border with him?" Sheena asks, finally interested.

"I showed the border patrol my screenplay, specifically a page where a bunch of towel heads shoot up a house, and I was like, 'Hey border patrol dudes, you all have rockin' tans. You could pass for terrorists. Want to be in my movie?'"

"And they believed you?"

"I had the biggest action star in the world in the front seat of the Nowmobile. That was a pretty good negotiating chip," Krysta points out.

"What happens when you don't contact them during the movie? Will they shut down your equipment trucks from leaving the state?" Sheena



asks, no stranger to bitter men who feel they're owed something.

"This movie will never be made. At least not with me and Boxer in the lead roles," Krysta sighs.

"Yeah, Hollywood is a cold mistress."

"I resent that," Krysta snips.

"It's just the system. We have to accept it, because we don't have the power to change it," Sheena muses.

"No. I meant the part about you using the term 'cold mistress.' It's wives that are cold. Mistresses are warm. Very warm. And they have tighter pussies. *Always*. They've done scientific studies," Krysta says, nodding at this statement.

"Oh dear. I forgot that you're cheating with a married man."

Looking at the glass as half full, Krysta asks, "Do you know what the best part is?"

"I'm going to guess his penis," Sheena thinks about it for a moment, then confirms, "Yup. That's my final answer."

"He already knows I'm a pornstar, and he doesn't care because he hasn't been indoctrinated into our puritanical society."

Almost as though they're in competition, Sheena asks Krysta, "You want to hear something fucked up?"

"Yeah, of course."

"You remember Tawna McBride, who we shot *12 Non-Angry Lesbians* with?"

"Don't say it," Krysta whispers.

"Her husband OD'd," Sheena reveals.

Krysta's face contorts into a look of pain, and fear.

"Wait, did you used to bleed with him or something?" Sheena asks, receiving a much more extreme reaction than what she was anticipating.

"No. I just feel... very sad for her," Krysta exhales.

"Oh, yeah. I guess that is pretty sad," Sheena says, like this just occurred to her.

With the mood changed to the point of no return, Krysta asks, "Do you mind if we don't order lunch?"

"I can't eat anyways, I'm doing anal in, like, two hours," Sheena admits, and our nurse outfit theory comes true like we could see the future, like we were Krysta Now.

"Aw, I hope it feels really good and there's tons of lube," Krysta says, then she stands up, ready to leave now that she's told her secret to someone.

"Wait. One thing before you go. Am I on the panel for the next Now show?" Sheena asks, and Krysta nods, then says, "One of the topics is going to be Liquid Karma abuse."

"I call dibs on using that story about Tawna's husband to fake-cry over," Sheena declares, then the feed immediately switches over to Ronald and Zora in the truck. It's night, and they're stuck in gridlock traffic, and Ronald has his buzzcut pressed against the window.

Staring out at the line of cars, and the featureless land, Ronald asks, "How far are we from Roland's home?"

"Close," Zora says, and since this isn't a measurement, Ronald asks, "How long was I asleep?"

"A bit," Zora says, again failing with specifics. "If a head injury caused your amnesia, then you may lose consciousness from time to time."

"Aren't you supposed to stay awake if you have a concussion?" Ronald asks.

"How did you remember that if you have amnesia?" Zora counters.

"Sometimes... I reach toward an empty shelf, and my hand finds something," Ronald says.

"Whoa there, save that metaphysical shit for somewhere else. I'm an improv gal, if you want to do slam poetry, I can introduce you to DREAM," Zora responds.

"Speaking of dreams... I did have this weird one, just now."

"I'd like to hear about it as much as I'd like to hear you do slam poetry," Zora says, dismissing him with a bright smile.

As quickly as Zora shuts down Ronald, the feed seems to lose interest as well, and it skips over to a woman in her early-forties, dressed in fatigues, sporting ruby-red lipstick.

"Who's the lady army-man? The... army-lady?" we ask.

*"That's US Army general, Teena MacArthur."*

"The lady who made the call that they should shoot Lester the park ranger," we say, placing the name immediately.

*"That's a bingo."*

We study Teena, but she doesn't give off a sinister vibe. She's cold, like one might expect from a general, but there is also a subdued humor to her-

we get the feeling that there's a smile waiting to escape those blood red lips. All around Teena is a jungle of knobs, gauges, and screens- there's so much machinery in the perimeter that there isn't even a safe place to put down an energy drink.

"She's in Utopia 3," we realize aloud.

*"You got it."*

Almost as though we're mimicking Ronald's UPU questions we ask, "Where are the other two Utopias located?"

*"One is in the Mediterranean and one is located around Pearl Harbor."*

"Why do we keep doing that?"

*"Doing what?"*

"Anytime we get attacked, we end up building some new, super attackable shit right where the tragedy happened."

*"Haven't you ever tried to replace something that was taken from you unfairly?"*

We have to look away when Pilot asks us this, the scar around his eye punctuating his question.

On the screen, four men in fatigues carry a large metal box that appears to be the dimensions of a coffin, but has way too many electrical components on it to merely be a burial box.

Teena gets on a walkie-talkie, and says, "The Whopper has arrived, but you still owe me one piece of information."

A deep voice on the other end of the walkie-talkie says, "I'm not a fan of debts."

"Thing is, you've got a warehouse full of Treer Saltairs ready for shipment. But there were two that were released on the morning of the 27th without my authorization. On one of them, the GPS system was disabled... and we don't know where the vehicle is."

"We released that vehicle to the von Westphalens. They said they were going to make history with it... and, well, now it's history," the deep voice responds.

The feed changes, in a speak-of-the-Devil way, to Treer Tower 1.

We see Inga von Westphalen at her desk, meeting with Baron and the guy in the white lab coat from the hanger where the two SUVs are stored.

Turning away from her screens, Inga says, "In the upper right panel, you will see that Mr. Santaros is just outside of Palmdale with Krysta Now and an unidentified male."

"Her name is Krysta Now?" the man in the lab coat asks.

"Yes. She is a very talented performer. Nobody rocks the cock like Krysta Now," Baron declares in a way that sounds more definitive than when other people say it.

"And what does this girl have to do with us?" the man in the white lab coat asks.

"Her boy-toy, Boxer Santaros, is set to go up in the mega-zeppelin on the 4<sup>th</sup>! We need to monitor this scandal so it doesn't blow up in the mega-zeppelin and steal our thunder!" Baron screeches, "Since no one rocks the cock like Krysta now, we know that Boxer will be more than distracted, and we'll always be able to locate him because Krysta refuses to enter entire parts of the state of California. She is cock rocking him into stasis where he just lies there and gets his cock fucked! He'll never leave that position, unless it's to contort Krysta into a hotter position! If we can make sure the scandal doesn't break until after the mega-zeppelin lands and is celebrated as a New World triumph, then we've all won!"

Inga stares at Baron for a long beat, then says, "I can understand how putting the specimen in the hands of a pornstar may seem like a foolish decision, but Ms. Kapowski... which is her Christian name... is not who she appears to be."

"She's actually a brunette," Baron chimes in.

Inga gives him another shame-inducing stare, then tells the man in the white lab coat, "What makes all of this so compelling is that Krysta Kapowski, now, is a psychic."

"Were you hyphenating her last name or were you saying she was born without psychic abilities, but has recently acquired them?" the man in the white lab coat asks scientifically.

"She became 'Now' later in life- at 18 to be exact- then she became a psychic after that," Inga says, providing a timeline.

"I'm sorry, but that doesn't seem possible," the man in the white lab coat says.

"She was a young looking 18-" Baron says, while Inga talks over him, responding, "-just like a wireless long-range electricity grid is impossible, right?"

Accepting the fact that we are now in a world where the impossible is made possible daily, the man in the white lab coat simply requests, "Please tell me how she gained her abilities."

Inga quickly takes the lead so Baron doesn't have a chance, "Krysta Kapowski was on Flight 93, during an 'airborne disturbance.' She was the only passenger who remained conscious during the destabilization of the aircraft. We know this because, after the fact, we brought all of the passengers to Edwards Air Force base, and testing was performed."

"I wasn't involved, nor was I notified," the man in the white lab coat says, incredulous, as though his white lab coat alone should gain him admission to this testing.

"Initially, you weren't involved, but now that I'm telling you this, you're involved, so... congratulations," Inga says, without apology.

"During this testing, what did you find?" the man in the white lab coat asks.

"While the other passengers were unable to give us information, Krysta was the only one who remembered what happened," Inga responds.

"Remembering an event you experienced is not an accomplishment," the man in the lab coat points out.

Inga nods at this, then reveals, "She was also the only one able to remember the future."

Baron inexplicably claps at this.

To get him to stop, Inga continues, "While under hypnosis... Ms. Kapowski produced a remarkable level of accuracy in predicting future events. We tested her regarding news she couldn't have possibly known-events that occurred and were reported *after* she boarded the flight, and she was able to give us answers. We could only detain her for a couple hours because she was flying into McCarran to perform her strip poetry, so we immediately put her to work on ways to make money." Inga opens a drawer and removes a stack of paper, then drops it on the table.

"You had a girl who could predict the future, and the first thing you thought to do was get her to write a screenplay?" the man in the white lab coat asks.

"We didn't ask her. We handed her a legal pad, and she started writing it, so we merely did not stop her. All of it is transcribed here."

We've read the pieces of the screenplay, and so has Inga, so she tempers expectations by saying, "We believe that... while admittedly ridiculous... this screenplay is some sort of prophecy."

"Did she write this while under hypnosis or after?" the man in the white lab coat asks.

"During hypnosis," Inga states.

Baron, trying to sound like an intellectual, says, "Some religious scholars have proposed that the entire Book of Revelation was written while the apostle John was under the influence of magic mushrooms!"

The man in the white lab coat seems to be wincing at this theory, and offers his own take, "Revelation has baffled even the most dedicated of religious scholars, while simultaneously being one of the most important portions of the Bible for any sort of fringe-religion. This text is what they hang their hat on- that the apocalypse is about to happen. It's a continual folly that people will still fall victim to, no matter how absurd it all is. And now here you are, believing that the one person who has finally been able to crack the code to Revelation is a psychic pornstar from Palmdale inspired by a book authored on magic mushrooms?"

It's silent for a moment, until Baron loudly confirms, "Precisely!"

Since we've already been supplied a copy of the script, when Inga begins going over hers, the feed switches to the dashcam of Fortunio's SUV. In the passenger seat is Boxer, who's arguing with Fortunio about the location they're looking for. Krysta sits in the back seat, holding onto a pink crystal.

"We've arrived," Krysta coos, not even looking out the window, and Fortunio slams on the breaks.

"A journey both short, and long," Boxer says.

The feed doesn't show us what the house looks like, but they seem convinced they're in the right place.

"Now what?" Fortunio asks, seemingly trying to figure out if he can stay in the SUV.

"We knock on the door, and visit my old friend, Tawna McBride," Krysta says, "Before you booked me, I used to shoot with her."

"Your grand apocalyptic visions contain your real-life porn friends?" Fortunio asks, like his producer credit is becoming less attractive, but the film is becoming decidedly easier for him to cast.

"Multiple friends. All great screenplays are inspired by the truth," Krysta says.

Fortunio smirks at this girl who barely uses screenplays in her productions, then he commits to their plan, and pulls the SUV to the side of the road, so they can begin location scouting.

The feed stays with the dashcam, even after everyone has gotten out of their seat and slammed their door shut. Eating our burger, looking at the static frame, we know that the feed hasn't frozen, because we can hear a muffled version of the conversation that's happening out on the street.

"Should we really be going with you on this visit?" we hear Fortunio ask, "Are you sure you want two big dudes like myself and Boxer?"

"-Jericho. That is Jericho," Krysta corrects Fortunio.

"Jericho Cane," Boxer bellows out.

"Let's just get what we need," we hear Fortunio say, and the way he says this makes us consider that they might be making this stop to score Liquid Karma, to feed Boxer's addiction. Fortunio wouldn't be able to protest this because he promised Martin that he'd score him some Liquid Karma and this could end up being the connection he needs.

The feed remains in the SUV, and we begin to wonder if we're caught up to real time events- if this has finally become a livestream.

Before we can ask Pilot about this, the feed hops to inside a house, but there's nothing in the frame besides a ratty sofa, and a baby carriage.

We hear a door open, then we hear a woman with a slight southern accent, or a tinge of Ebonics, say, "Well, well, well... if it ain't Krysta Now."

"Tawna, you look very hot," we hear Krysta say.

We're able to intuit the exact moment Tawna IDs the mountain of a man at her doorstep- it's when she shrieks, "Boxer mother-fuckin' Santaros!"

"You must be mistaken. I'm Jericho Cane," we hear Boxer say, but Tawna is giggling and repeating, "No fucking way," so it's as though he didn't even respond to her. Once she gets a hold of herself, Tawna says, "Damn, Krysta. I knew you was lookin' to go legit with your career, and yeah, you definitely do have more reasonable tits now... but Boxer Santaros? That is some next level dedication to mainstream success." Before Krysta can respond, Tawna adds, "Fuck me!" maybe as an exclamation, maybe as a demand.

"I'm here too," we hear Fortunio say.

"Okay, well. Hello, sir..." Tawna responds.

“As you may or may not know, Krysta and I wrote a screenplay together. Do you have a moment to talk about our spec-script, *The Power*?” Boxer asks, in his deep Jericho Cain voice.

“Is this... like, a Jesus thing?” Tawna asks.

“Hopefully not. If it was to become a Jesus thing, we’ll all be in huge trouble,” Krysta says, and we laugh at this. It’s an inside joke we share with Krysta Now, despite the fact that we’ve never met her.

Pilot is smiling at the screen and shaking his head.

*“That girl is the best.”*

“Nobody...” we say and we don’t have to finish the statement, because everyone’s brain auto-completes it now.

“Don’t discount the Jesus thing,” Tawna says, then she finally walks into the room where the camera is set up, as she explains, “The box office for Christian films is actually pretty good. Great, great ROI, all things considered.”

The quality of the footage isn’t great, but now that she’s in frame, we see Tawna is a beautiful black woman who must be close to 5’10”. Her hair is short and carefully styled, and she looks so skinny that we have to wonder, *Did this Tawna have a kid, or was it just the girl in the screenplay?*

Tawna sits down on the couch, then reaches into the stroller, and removes a newborn infant.

Boxer eyes the baby nervously, then asks, “Where’s Rick?” because in the screenplay, Jericho Cane murders Rick McBride.

“Something happened...” Tawna responds, and that’s where her response ends.

“What happened?” Boxer asks.

“Stop, that’s inappropriate,” Krysta says, seemingly trying to stop the conversation. Maybe she genuinely *is* in love with Boxer, and she just wants a normal life now. What if she experienced a vision of the future where she and Boxer live happily ever after as long as they don’t get too deep in all this shit?

Tawna looks away from her guests for a moment, then in a wobbly voice, she says, “Rick... is dead.”

Krysta’s hand pops up to her boobs, as she pretends this is new news, saying, “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“He OD’d,” Tawna says, and it’s clear the disappointment is still fresh.

“Was it meth?” Krysta asks, almost excited, because Rick wasn’t shot.



Tawna shakes her head no.

“OCs?” Krysta asks.

“Nothing like that,” Tawna responds.

Boxer shakes his head at Krysta's guesses, then says, “Rick died shooting Liquid Karma.”

It's in this moment that we fall behind the man with the awful memory. Boxer seems to understand that the screenplay isn't *exactly* what's happening- it's *the feeling* of what's happening.

Rick shoots a gun in the screenplay, and shoots Liquid Karma in real-life. Both are lethal decisions. Both are Rick's fault. In *The Power*, Rick makes a quick and illogical choice, that he knows will result in the end of his life, and he does it selfishly, in front of the two people in his life he should be protecting.

Quietly, like she knows her TV is watching and listening to her, Tanya admits, “He wasn't some druggie. He had no choice but to go into 'The Program.'”

“AA? That probably means he was a-” Fortunio starts to say, but Krysta interrupts him, requesting, “-tell me about 'The Program.'”

“Well, Rick was in the army for, like, a long time. He did three tours in Iraq... he came home from the first two with these nightmares, and this nervous condition, but he was a really good husband. I wouldn't have had a kid with him if I thought the problems he was having after the war were going to stick around. Then... during the third tour, Rick would call me, and he'd be crying. I felt so bad about what was happening... and I was helpless. I couldn't be there for him, ya know? I wasn't able to put an arm around him when he needed it the most. Then, I guess someone noticed he was having some problems, so The Army offered him something that would help. Rick got involved in some top-secret 'program' that was supposed to 'cure' him. He said he couldn't tell me anything about it or they'd kill him.”

“Do you think they killed him, then covered it up?” Fortunio asks, clearly only staying in the conversation because he's intrigued by the mystery.

“No. I think the army was testing some kind of drug on him. They started paying him good money, and sure, Rick was a good man, but he was not worth good money.”

“That's true,” Krysta says, seemingly thinking she's being helpful.

“Did he start 'The Program' before you got pregnant?” Boxer asks, and this is the most proactive we’ve ever seen him. He truly *has* transformed into Jericho Cane.

“Yeah... he returned here on leave after The Program started- that was one of the 'perks' they offered him. He was so happy to be back with me, and it was good. He was so good. Everything was just like I wanted it to be. Then, he went back. He didn’t tell me about The Program until after I found out I was pregnant, and after it was too late to *not* have the baby. He was worried that I’d terminate the pregnancy out of fear that Caleb might come out all jacked up, but the tests were all coming back fine, and we agreed to put it behind us.”

Krysta even got the *name* right.

“How are you so sure his death wasn't a set-up situation?” Fortunio asks, not giving up on his conspiracy.

“Because I found Rick on the bathroom floor... and there was this weird syringe stuck in his neck. It looked all futuristic and shit.”

Boxer reaches into his hoodie pocket and removes a Treer branded syringe, “Like this?”

Tawna recoils at the sight of the contraband, holding her baby to her chest.

“Boxer, please leave the room with that,” Krysta says calmly.

Every bit of Jericho Cane disappears from Boxer's demeanor, and he puts the syringe back in his hoodie, then begins tapping his fingers.

“Get out of here with that shit,” Tawna yells at Boxer, and Boxer leaves the frame, then after a couple seconds of silence, we hear a door slam.

“I'm sorry he did that,” Krysta says.

“Be careful with him,” Tawna warns.

Krysta winces, and looks back to where Boxer fled to. Fortunio motions that he's going to check on him, so that Krysta can continue her conversation.

Quietly, girl-to-girl, Krysta asks, “What was it like for Rick? What do I have to watch out for?”

“I think the shit was giving him hallucinations,” Tawna admits, “I would find him standing out in our front yard, and you saw our yard, it's rocks and sand- ain't shit out there. When I would ask him what he was doing...” Tawna squints her eyes, like she's still dealing with this answer, “...he would say that he was waiting for *it to fall*. At first, I thought he was saying

he was waiting *for* the fall, but every time I found him out there, he would say, 'it,' and he would be waiting for *it* to drop from the sky.

"Did you ask him what *it* was?" Krysta questions.

"I did..." Tawna responds. She takes a deep breath, then says, "He told me that the blood of the rich would rain down on the city."

"Krysta," we hear Fortunio call out.

Krysta is in a trance, as she quietly says, "The blood of the—"

"—hey, Krysta, come get your man!" Fortunio bellows, in a sing-songy way.

Krysta turns toward the direction we saw Boxer exit the frame, and when no one gets up from the sofa, Fortunio calls out, "I think he's in the bathroom... with that syringe..."

"Excuse me," Krysta gasps out, hopping off the sofa.

"The bathroom is at the end of the hall," Tawna says, and Krysta immediately rushes in that direction.

The feed, mercifully, doesn't cut to the bathroom, but we do get a vision of the hallway that looks like a found footage horror movie. We have audio on the footage as well, and when we hear Caleb speaking gibberish noises in the other room, we realize that we're watching a baby monitor. The botnet that is the Fluid Karma network even includes our children's baby monitors. From the moment of birth, to the moment of death, this generation will be filming their own reality show.

Fortunio points at the door, and whispers something to Krysta.

We lean forward and listen carefully as Krysta puts her ear to the door.

We faintly hear a panicked ramble of, "He did it here. He did it here. I killed him. I killed him in the screenplay. He was here," as it seems the pressure of being Jericho Cane implodes the fragile mind of Boxer Santaros, and we can assume that relief is being offered in the form of a needle to the neck.

Sometimes it doesn't matter if you can see the future, you're still doomed to repeat the past.

We hear a massive thud, which makes Krysta jump away from the door, and this removes the speculation regarding if Boxer is going to inject himself.

We look to Pilot, who's staring at the screen like he's watching a car chase. We turn back, but with less pure interest, and more fear.

Krysta tries to force her way into the bathroom, but she can't get the door open, since Boxer must be blocking it.

Tawna, somewhere else in the house, is repeating, "Boxer, this isn't funny! This isn't funny, Boxer!"

Fortunio walks over to Krysta, and moves her so her back is against the wall, then he walks to the door of the bathroom. He twists the doorknob, then rams his considerable weight into the door. The door opens just a crack, but Boxer's bulk keeps it from opening further. After three solid shoulder-slams, Fortunio has the door open enough for Krysta's tiny frame to slide inside the bathroom, only pausing to angle her boobs.

Now that the door is open, we can hear everything perfectly, and Krysta is demanding, "Boxer, Jericho, look at me. I'm here for you. I'm here with you. We are in Palmdale, California. You are here, with me, Krysta Now, Dr. Muriel Fox, and everything is okay."

"Did he do it too!?" we hear Tawna yell, "Am I that fucking cursed!?"

"I spoke with Rick," we hear Boxer gasp out.

Krysta finally finds a response, saying, "Honey. I think you're in Jericho-mode right now, and-"

"-I can bleed through time. I did it again," we hear Boxer say.

"How?" Krysta asks, barely audible on the crackly feed.

"I did some of the Liquid Karma after I went in here, not the whole syringe. See. Look. There's still some left. You can have it."

"Thank you, Boxer. Now tell me what you saw."

"After I did some of it... I felt a piece of me... untether. It was like my body was here, on the floor, but the electrical impulses that I'm made up of somehow shifted to a separate plane. I was having a conversation in the past, while I was here."

"Were you told anything?" Krysta asks hopefully, and it's almost like this information brings her closer to Boxer, as though she's thinking, *Maybe I'm not the only freak in this confusing world.*

"No. I tried to change the course of things. I tried to keep Rick from taking the Liquid Karma. And I failed. Even when I told him what would happen, he did it."

"What is he saying!" Tawna yells.

"I spoke with your husband," Boxer yells back.

"Get the fuck out of my house!" Tawna screams back.

"I'm so sorry... I tried to save him!" is Boxer's response.

“Get out!” Tawna yells, and Krysta loudly whispers, “We have to go. Please, baby. Please. Get up. Yeah. Get up.”

The door to the bathroom flies open, and Krysta has her arm wrapped around Boxer's massive frame. Fortunio immediately rushes to help as well, and the trio quickly makes their way toward the front door.

The feed clicks back to the living room camera, as Tawna yells, “You couldn't be satisfied with showing off your boyfriend? You had to hurt me too?”

“I'm really sorry,” Krysta says, leaving Boxer's side, as Fortunio leads him outside.

Krysta looks her friend in the eyes, and says, “If you need anything for Caleb- I mean anything- ask me, and it will be yours. He's precious, and he may seem like a lot to handle, you might be worried about him every second of the day, but he's a very special boy, and he was given to you- a very special girl- because *He* knew you would handle it, and still persevere. What's going on right now in your life may seem unfair, or scary, or you may feel helpless, but please know, you're going to be alright. And I will do everything I can to ensure that's not an opinion, but instead a fact.”

Tawna looks confused and overwhelmed by the entirety of this visit.

Krysta reaches into her bra and removes a stack of bills, then holds the folded money out.

“I can't take this from you,” Tawna says, shaking her head.

“I walked into your home, and I caused a whole bunch of trouble. I can't take back what I did, but I *can* give you this gift, to make sure that tomorrow is a little bit better than today was. Use it to make your future safer.”

Tawna hesitantly steps forward, and takes the money, then she looks Krysta in the eyes, and says, “Thank you for this... and tell Boxer that I know how that Liquid Karma road ends, and he's right, once that shit grips you, no one can change what happened.”

Krysta nods, and looks out to the road, then she says, “Goodbye, Tawna.”

“Goodbye, Krysta.”

Even after Tawna has shut the front door, the feed stays in her house.

Tawna lets the stack of bills fall from her hand, onto the carpet, and she focuses on her son. She looks into his eyes, and fresh tears fall onto his

face. Instead of injecting Liquid Karma, we watch Tawna expel karma liquid.

The feed mercifully cuts to the dashcam in Fortunio's SUV, and Boxer, sitting in the back seat next to Krysta, quietly asks, "Did you know that her son was named Caleb?"

"In the way you know Rick, I knew his name is Caleb," Krysta admits, almost in ponderment of if she should've stepped back into Tawna's life at all.

The SUV pulls away from the curb, and Boxer's wide-eyed expression makes us wonder what he's seeing out the window.

"You can go into the past, I can see the future, and the most fucked up part of all of this... is that I don't think either of us can use these powers to fix things," Krysta says.

We look to Pilot, who's watching the screen, and he doesn't feel our attention- he doesn't look over at us- and we can't help but feel as though this is intentional.

The futility that Boxer and Krysta are filled with may also be something Pilot feels. We look back to the laptop screen because we want to fix the future.

The feed has jumped to the dashcam of Zora's truck. They're parked, and we hear the sounds of a tied up man, struggling on the truck bed for freedom. Neither Zora nor Ronald are looking at each other. They're both staring at the dashboard.

It's still night on this feed, but the interior lights in the truck are on.

The sun is still high in the sky above us, so the stream still hasn't caught up to us yet.

"Usually this doesn't happen," Ronald finally says.

"It's okay, honey," Zora says, then she glances down at Ronald's lap.

"No, I mean... this makes me less of a man."

"No, it doesn't, maybe you're just not in the mood," Zora says.

Ronald lifts up a hamburger, and we're relieved that he was discussing his appetite for food, not his limp cock. He stares the hamburger down, but instead of taking a bite, he says, "This is a nice truck."

"Yeah, my fuckface dad bought it for me! Thanks, Dad!" Zora yells.

"You need to work on the way you express gratitude," Ronald says, trying to be helpful.

Zora punches the fabric on the ceiling of the truck, then yells, “The presence of this truck can't cover your absence, Dad!”

“Who is this show for?” Ronald asks, operating at a near-emotionless stasis, a foot away from the ranting and raving Neo-Marxist.

Zora shakes her head, then a wide smile creeps across her face, and she runs her hand along the dash, as she explains, “Sorry, I presume that my dad is watching this camera at all times, since the truck is in his name and he's never once trusted me.”

Ronald seems somewhat comforted by this, then says, “At least he bought you a truck that kicks ass.”

“Yes, all Neo-Marxists drive Treer vehicles, as a bold rejection of the military occupation of other nations for oil.”

“What's so special about a Treer vehicle?” Ronald asks.

“Well, hun, a gas guzzler truck runs off a fuel we murder foreign civilians for, and a FluidKar runs off an energy field that uses Earth-goo and the ocean.”

Ronald nods at this, then says, “It's interesting... we're discussing an energy field... that runs this truck, and it's totally green, at least as far as there are no toxic byproducts or emissions.”

“Yuhuh,” Zora says, stuffing a burger in her face.

“And I have this Mooby's meal in front of me, but I have no hunger for it, and- this is a bit of an overshare, but I haven't made a bowel movement for as long as I can remember. So what if I'm like this vehicle? What if I'm powered the same way?”

“Trippyyyy,” Zora coos, then reaches over and grabs the burger out of Ronald's lap. She takes a massive bite, then her hand dips out of frame and she seems to be patting her stomach, as she says, “I think for my next bowel movement, I'll be pooping for the both of us. I'll be droppin' a number four. Two tickets to Splash Mountain!”

By the time we're done wincing in disgust, we notice the feed has switched to a room we've never seen- it's a bedroom- even if nothing happens here, we will watch with the utmost contentment that we don't have to hear Zora discuss the Mooby's-dump she feels bubbling inside her.

We assume we're watching from a TV-embedded camera because the bed in this room is perfectly framed, and empty. The room is stark, but not in the way that a bachelor might be too lazy to buy furniture, so he sleeps on a bare mattress on the floor- this is a spare design that is made possible

by the fact that there are probably many other rooms that can be devoted to possessions, allowing the bedroom to remain sleek and clutter-free.

We start to ask, "Why did it switch to a static feed of a bedr-" but our brain short circuits when a totally nude Serpentine walks into frame and stops directly in front of the camera. We look at the profile of her slender, naked body- her thighs, free of cellulite- her ass, defying gravity- her breasts cresting to pointy nipples- her back covered in a massive tattoo of a snake wrapped around a dagger.

"Jimmy has arrived at da farmhouse," Serpentine says.

"Fantastic news, my dear!" is the response she receives, and the lisp is unmistakable- it's Baron.

"Oh, jeez. Serpentine. You can do better," we say to the screen.

*"The power someone holds can often surpass the seduction of a perfect jawline."*

"Yeah... but still, yuck," is our nuanced response.

"I'd like you to join Jimmy at the farmhouse," we hear Baron declare.

"He is the one who must mark Boxer. I cannot."

"You don't have to," Baron assures her, "You just have to do what you normally do- ya know, linger in the background and smoke a concerning amount, while making sure the project remains focused."

"Do you believe dat Jimmy intends to double-cross us?" Serpentine asks, sliding on an evening dress that is certainly not barn attire.

"Of course I don't trust him! The man is a Neo-Marxist, with a rainbow mohawk, who may or may not own a shirt! Additionally, I have supreme confidence that you can complete the task, so I'd like you there, as insurance," Baron explains.

"Or?" Serpentine asks, toying with him.

"Or the rift will expand, and Boxer doesn't fulfill the prophecy because we never outfitted him in his battle armor," Baron practically croaks out.

"Shit, so Boxer really *is* the dude who needs to save the world?" we ask.

Pilot shakes his head no.

"No?" we ask, eyebrows raised.

Pilot merely points back at the laptop screen.

"Very well. Will you work on da guest list for da launch while I'm gone?" Serpentine asks, lighting a cigarette, then affixing it to her signature long plastic holder.



“Absolutely. That’s where your work from tonight will finally be unveiled!” Baron says, an excitement in his voice.

“I won’t question your demand, because I look forward to da answer we will receive then,” Serpentine says, then in an abrupt cut, we’re back at Fortunio’s dashcam and he’s slamming the horn.

Boxer and Krysta crane their necks to see what’s going on in front of them, and we can see that behind them is a line of cars.

“Well, team, this whole idea of visiting places from your stellar screenplay has been a real blast so far,” Fortunio sarcastically notes, after being degraded to nothing more than a chauffeur.

“Boxer had an important vision at the last location, and his transformation demands that we continue on this road,” Krysta responds.

“I just wanna go home and drink Bud Light, then pass out,” Fortunio whines.

“You’ve got miles to go before you sleep,” Krysta says.

“And miles to go before you sleep,” Boxer echoes, his Jericho Cane voice back.

“And what if I turn this car around?” Fortunio asks, like someone’s dad.

It’s now a little confusing regarding what Fortunio is still doing with Boxer and Krysta. Is he now Boxer’s chauffeur? Is he Boxer’s bodyguard? Is this all in interest of preserving his production credit for *The Power*? Is he going to use this dashcam footage to sink the Eliot/Frost campaign? Fortunio’s presence, while helpful to Boxer and Krysta, looms ominous, as our brain continually focuses on the question, *What’s he getting out of all of this besides a shitty producer credit?*

“How will you pay your debt to Martin if you don’t have us?” Krysta asks, and our question is easily answered.

“How did you know about that?” Fortunio asks, worry replacing anger as his primary emotion.

“I’m clairvoyant, you dipshit. That’s why we’re headed out to a place we’ve never been, yet I can describe it to you in full detail,” Krysta responds.

The FluidKar slowly moves through traffic, and a muffled yelling can be heard. It sounds like someone is being murdered, while holding a megaphone to their mouth.

“Oh, fuck off,” Fortunio says, turning back to Krysta, “Was this all just a ruse to get me to drive you to Marxchella?”

“We’re going to a black farmhouse close to here. We might have to cut through Marxchella, but it will be quick,” Krysta says quietly.

“A black farmhouse,” Boxer repeats, his voice booming with action star bass.

“All of these FluidKars aren’t headed to some farmhouse,” Fortunio says.

“This isn’t just *some* farmhouse, Fortunio,” Boxer corrects him, “In my blockbuster screenplay that I wrote with Krysta Now-” Boxer sends a loving look to his girl, “-a black farmhouse is where Jericho Cane battles a serpent for the good of baby Caleb.”

Instead of asking Boxer what happens next, Fortunio turns the radio on, obviously annoyed by this whole prophecy thing.

Part of us feels like we should have stayed up all night reading *The Power*. The complete knowledge of the prophecy would’ve allowed us to become clairvoyant as well.

Eventually, the SUV starts moving again, and Fortunio squints at what’s up ahead, while asking, “Why are they flagging us into this lot?”

“Because we’re here,” Krysta says.

This doesn’t ease Fortunio’s displeasure.

Boxer closes his eyes, and Krysta gives him a back massage, as Fortunio appears to be shepherded to an area where he can park.

Finally, after two full minutes of Fortunio stewing in anger, Boxer seemingly meditating, and Krysta really going to town on her man’s shoulders, the SUV comes to a stop. Before anyone gets out, Boxer puts his hood up, knowing that he’ll have to pass through the crowd. Krysta puts on a pink hoodie, and also puts up her hood- which has little cat ears on the top of it- Boxer smiles at Krysta when he notices this.

All three passengers exit the vehicle, then instead of the feed switching over, it just sits static, observing the interior of the SUV.

We do a mental inventory to recall where everyone is. It seems impossible that not only is there no footage of the parking lot, but that this static shot from a car interior is the most important moment in the timeline. We know that Zora and Ronald are driving back to LA from Lake Mead, but their footage has to be from last night because the sky doesn’t match. We know that Serpentine may be who Krysta is taking Boxer to meet, or there’s the possibility that Serpentine is going to ambush the

meeting. We know that Pilot is next to us, and we feel relief that his nose is back in his Bible now.

“It feels like the end of the world just got closer,” we admit.

*“It has, and does, every moment, of every day.”*

We shoot a glance at Pilot, but he doesn't even look up from his Bible.

“Are you getting helpful information from that?” we ask, careful to make sure it doesn't sound like a judgment or attack.

Pilot nods.

“Feel free to share anything that we should know,” we say, then the feed finally switches away from the dashcam, and we should feel relief, but we're watching Fortunio, a hooded Krysta, and a hooded Boxer moving through a crowd, while being recorded from a rifle-sight camera. Occasionally, we lose visibility as the out-of-place trio is obstructed by a booth selling art, or hemp clothing, or magical crystals. There's a common picture posted and graffitied everywhere- a blue and red stencil of a man's outline- and eventually, we are able to ID who's on the poster- it's Karl Marx. This has to be a Marxist potluck of sorts.

Boxer, Fortunio, and Krysta pause as they reach a performance stage. A marginally attractive blonde girl and a black guy with a buzz cut are hyping up the crowd, and we instantly know there's a fifty percent chance they will be doing improv comedy, and a fifty percent chance they'll be doing slam poetry. We step into Fortunio's shoes and want to yell into the screen, *Get the fuck out of here, you're normal people! You don't belong here!*

Of all the human shitbags that are collected in this place, it's Boxer and Krysta- true patriots- that have gained the attention of the crosshairs. It feels like our system is broken. When did it become the norm for the awful to assemble in droves while the righteous have to outrun the sights trained on their heads?

We secretly wish we could just cut to the barn so Serpentine's elegant image would be in the same frame as Krysta's bubblegum-hot presence, finally.

The only sound we have for the feed is coming from the rifle, so it's all distanced noise, but we hear the black guy yell, “My name is Dion Element!” in perfect fidelity, because he's a man who doesn't need a mic.

“And I am D, to the R, to the E, to the A, to the M, biznitchesss,” the white girl says, and we try to crane our neck to read Pilot's Bible because this is already intolerable. The girl further specifies, “All that shit is in

capitals, but don't call me a capitalist. And don't lowercase me, I'm not a lower case to you, to push through your system like I'm shit!"

Pilot angles his Bible away from us, so we're forced to look at the screen as DREAM continues saying total nonsense, "Spare me your corporate synergy. Give me your tormented energy! Your homogeneity and hetero-normative story bores me. Trans-racial glory! "

The crowd, instead of throwing trash and setting the stage alight, like normal human beings would, genuinely seems entertained by this slam poetry. "Evolution is revolution!" DREAM shrieks, to which Dion declares, "Destroy Capitalism, dethrone God."

"Shoot them!" we yell at the laptop, and suddenly, we feel like Nana Mae Frost isn't using her tools to her complete advantage.

Pilot laughs at our pain.

Boxer grabs Krysta's hand, rightfully leading her away from this dreadful spectacle, and Fortunio follows close behind, frowning at everything. This is what an action movie star does- he saves his girl from terrible things like natural disasters, or evil villains, or live poetry, while the sidekick third wheels it.

As the trio disappears behind the stage, suddenly the sight that was on them is now lowered to the ground and it begins jostling. As the Blair Witchy movement continues, to a soundtrack of swishes, we realize the gunman is running.

Pilot bookmarks his Bible, then sets it between us on the turret, and we know that this means something is about to pop off.

When the feed stabilizes and the sight is stabilized on our point of interest, we see that, as promised, Krysta has brought them to a black farmhouse. We have to wonder if the massive stage was strategically located to block this house from being visited unexpectedly. No one, save a true delusional Neo-Marxist, would gravitate to the backstage area where Dion and DREAM could be pontificating, so this couple's existence and "art" was essentially a force field to protect what's beyond that rising sun. This is an energy field that cripples all those struck by it- a reverse Fluid Karma.

Boxer walks toward the farmhouse, but Krysta pulls his hand, and leads him *past* the house. They step out of frame. The sight remains on Fortunio, who seems to consider going to the front door of the house, but then heads in the direction that Krysta is leading Boxer. The sight tracks with him, and

we see that, beyond the farmhouse, even further from the stage, is a black barn.

When Fortunio, Boxer, and Krysta arrive at the barn, a small slat slides open in the door, and a pair of eyes peer out. A discussion happens at the door, but we can't hear it because Dion is repeatedly screaming, "Marks us, Marxist, marks suck!" and we regard this villainous Mark, or the group of "marks," to be figures of heroic statue because anyone who could displease a Neo-Marxist this much must be holding society together in some way. Maybe Dion just ran out of Mark-related evils though. We figure that he means "mark" like a target... or maybe it's just his dad's name.

Eventually, the slat in the barn door slides shut, then the door slides open, and the trio is quickly ushered inside.

The feed switches to a camera within the barn, and what once felt like a place off the grid reveals itself to be distinctly *on* the grid. We have faint audio, and we're relieved that everything we're seeing is no longer from a scope.

The man who was working the door turns out to be Jimmy Hermosa. His tall multicolored mohawk is unmistakable. The fact that he's now in this barn, when he was previously on the yacht, and Zora and Ronald are still driving away from the yacht, makes us wonder when exactly this is all happening. The Ronald and Zora footage is definitely on a delay, but this footage could be in real-time.

In an effort to streamline matters, we decide to focus less on *when* this happened, and instead search for reasons *why* we're being shown this footage.

Pleased to see a familiar face on this bizarre trek, Fortunio howls, "Jimmyyy!" and he's instantly transformed from bitter to ecstatic. The two men begin an overly-complicated, obviously previously-practiced handshake, then look pretty satisfied with themselves once they finish it.

"How ya been?" Fortunio asks, and Jimmy, still shirtless, says, "Man, some rich couple just paid me to chill on their yacht and fuck with some dudes. You see this tan?"

"Honestly, you always look like Iggy Pop wearing a vest made out of football leather, so I really can't tell the difference," Fortunio teases him.

"We all can't have skin like a baby's butt," Jimmy says, then pinches Fortunio's cheek.

Fortunio playfully slaps Jimmy's hand away, while giggling, and this, of course, causes both of them to start shadow boxing- Jimmy utilizing an olde time raised fist style, while Fortunio is more Butterbean about it.

"How do you two know each other?" Krysta asks, hoping to distract them from their male bonding rituals.

"I live in Hermosa Beach, and this guy's name is Jimmy Hermosa. Gee, I wonder how we met," Fortunio says, furrowing his brow and lowering his fists.

Boxer, exhausted from this whirlwind of a day, walks across the barn, and sits down on a medical-looking chair that's the length of his entire body and has padded arms that are outstretched, creating a crucifix. Next to the chair is a long metal table with nothing on it. Five computer screens line the far wall of the barn, and they show exactly what's playing on our feed, as well as four other views which also seem to be the interior of the barn. Wait- *no*- one of the views seems to be of room off to the side of the main space we're in. In this room, we watch Serpentine step into frame. She's pacing, smoking a Cruella de Vil cigarette, yelling into a cell phone. There's no audio feed for this room, so we have no idea who she's speaking with. We can presume it's Baron, but then again, maybe it isn't.

Suddenly, the monitors on the far wall seem to glitch out, and when they stabilize, we're presented with various religious icons- one per screen.

Jimmy looks over to Krysta, and assures her, "Don't worry, the artist will be right out," then he makes his way toward the far right side of the frame.

"Prince is going to be here?" we ask hopefully.

*"Do you really think Prince is showing up to an event with a banner casually suggesting we 'Dethrone God?'"*

"Alright, well, then who's the artist?"

*"At Marxchella, everyone is an artist, so we'll just have to wait and see."*

We focus on the screen, as Jimmy slaps his own face, twice, and no one reacts because it doesn't seem exactly out of place with his personality. It's easy to believe that he does this casually throughout the day.

Eventually, Krysta says, "Jimmy?" and the rainbow mohawk divines back to her, as she asks, "This is a good idea, right?"

Jimmy's mohawk bops as he nods to confirm it is.

Boxer reacts to this sign of uncertainty from Krysta by sitting up on the crucifix table, and he steeples his fingers, tapping them together, while nervously scanning the room.

“Babe, it's okay,” Krysta says, gravitating toward him.

“In our screenplay, Jericho Cane has a hell of a time in this barn,” Boxer points out, then his voice lowers to a whisper as he acknowledges, “There's so much farting in this scene.”

“I know, but you have to be here. Sometimes a little bit of hell allows you to recognize heaven when you see it,” Krysta reminds him, “It's like that old saying... if you're going through a fart cloud, keep going.”

We hear a door being thrown open, then Serpentine appears in the frame. She moves smoothly and quickly toward Boxer, assuring him, “Don't look so scared, Mistah Santaros. Da future... is just like you imagined.”

Boxer ceases tapping his fingertips together, and admits, “Krysta had most of the ideas. I just made sure that the grammar was correct.”

“Are you prepared to wear da armor of God?” Serpentine asks him.

Boxer looks to Krysta, and she nods to him. Boxer replicates the nod.

“Wise choice. Lie back, Mistah Santaros,” Serpentine requests, then puffs her cigarette.

Jimmy leaves the frame, while Boxer looks to Krysta, and quietly asks, “How do you know this woman?”

“Oh, Serpentine? She is a huge fan of my work, and she also dabbles in ancient Chinese sorcery and mysticism, which, like, we've been really interested in featuring on my talk show. Serpentine's Chinese sorcery can help us in other ways too... like... ya know... for helping... our chakras.”

“What's wrong with our chakras?” Boxer asks, acquiring yet another misalignment within himself.

“Well, you can't remember anything beyond waking up in the desert outside of Lake Mead,” Krysta aptly points out.

“I'm just hesitant about trusting her,” Boxer whispers, “We need to remain vigilant so we aren't victims of... a chakra con.”

Fortunio bursts out with an exaggerated laugh as he eavesdrops on this conversation.

“I'll talk to her,” Krysta assures Boxer, then she walks over to Serpentine, who seems to exist in a cloud of smoke, and she asks, “How will the armor be manifested?”

“Custom ink from Treer products- a Fluid Karma solution mixed with da blood of da snake,” Serpentine says, and our eyes dart back to the far edge of the frame as Jimmy Hermosa reappears, but now he's carefully holding a massive snake that's doing its best to wriggle free from his grip.

Serpentine walks over to one of the monitors on the wall, then she reaches behind it, and when her hand reappears, she's holding a large carving knife.

His leathery muscles surging as he traverses the frame and battles the snake, Jimmy eventually gets the writhing beast down on the metal table. In a brutal instant, Serpentine lifts the knife, then slams it down, chopping the snake in half, creating one of the most violent noises we've ever heard.

Jimmy holds up both sides of the snake, like a magic trick has just been completed, then he walks out of frame. We look to the screens on the wall to see what Jimmy is doing with the snake pieces, but the screen no longer shows the room, and some religious-looking symbol from the “coexist” bumper sticker has replaced the feed-within-a-feed.

Serpentine points to the screens, and says, “Da armor of God contains a symbol from each major religion of da Earth, which will be inked upon your chest and back.”

On the screens, we see the star of David, the face of Jesus Christ, some Hindu and Buddhist designs that we're not totally sure about, various Islamic icons we have no comment regarding, and an anarchy symbol we recognize from high school. On the final screen, we see the mark of the beast, and we become concerned that this isn't the armor of God, but instead, the armor of chaos.

“Remove your shirt,” Serpentine says casually to Boxer.

Like an assistant in this procedure, Krysta walks over and wraps her left arm around Boxer. She runs her hand under his hoodie, across his toned stomach. Boxer stops making eye contact with Serpentine to his left, so he can face Krysta to his right.

Krysta whispers something to Boxer, then together they remove his hoodie.

“Lie back down,” Serpentine demands.

Boxer hesitantly complies, as he softly asks Krysta, “Do I need to do this?”

Krysta nods her head yes.

“You'll be here with me the whole time?”



Again, Krysta nods her head yes.

"I'll be able to do this, with you," Boxer tells her, as well as himself.

"Oh, like, you want to get matching tattoos?" Krysta asks, breaking the mood, misinterpreting Boxer's sentiment. She looks at the screens on the wall, then says, "Maybe I could get the Jewy one a little above my ass crack."

This is the point where the feed goes black, and it feels like a merciful cut. At first, we think that we're watching a scope pointed to the dark night's sky, and we stay seated, even as Pilot gets up.

*"Hey, tourist. Our shifts over."*

"Usually... it makes an electronic noise..." we say, and maybe our mind has just gotten used to buying seasons of TV, then sitting there until a final massive season-ending payoff stuns us in its revelatory glory, before we're able to go to bed. We didn't receive the payoff tonight. At best, we got low-level antisemitism, then... nothing.

We stand up, and turn to Pilot. He raises his Bible toward the setting sun, using it as a visor.

*"If you look to the sky, inland, you can see the time rift."*

"Cool," we respond, and we keep our eyes on the edge of the roof, as we begin walking away from the turret.

We don't want this rift to exist, so we won't look for it. We won't watch the sky, and it will be as though it isn't there.

We climb down from the roof, and we wait for Pilot to do the same.

Clutching his Bible, Pilot leads us through the Mariasol, which is pretty empty.

We check our phone and it's past dinner time, which doesn't track. The amount of time we sat on the roof doesn't seem to match the length of footage we watched. We're missing minutes, but our memory doesn't feel incomplete. We have to wonder if, due to the proximity to the Tidal Generator, time is actually being stretched and slowed based on the ebb and flow of the all-powerful ocean. We're about to bring this theory up to Pilot, but he becomes preoccupied with a fat white woman on the stairs outside the Mariasol. The woman calls him a "warmonger," and a "puppet," and a "piece of shit, poisoning the minds of innocent children." Pilot doesn't engage with her. He passes her by, and she continues yelling, trying to start a war, but never getting the all-necessary retaliation needed to set it off.

When we begin walking the pier, we decide to ask a new question, the one question that could jeopardize- at minimum- our mind blowing vacation- and at maximum- all life on Earth.

“Are you going to get in trouble for having a civilian up there with you?” we ask.

*“If I do, who gives a shit? If you don't stay up there, the world ends. If you do stay up there, and someone gets pissed, they reassign me to the sector atop The Strand, by The Poop Deck, and I have to deal with drunken assholes trying to climb on the roof- the exact same thing you did.”*

“Drunkenness wasn't the catalyst for that climb.”

*“I know. You were called to my turret. You were compelled to climb up there, which is why I can give you shit about it without feeling guilty.”*

“You believe it was destiny?” we ask.

*“I believe I'm here for a reason, and you're here with me, so it's easy to believe the same thing about you.”*

Hearing this makes us feel really, really good. This might not be the vacation we imagined, but it's an experience that is crucial to our future. When people send postcards from their vacation spots, the card sometimes bears the statement, “You should be here,” but with this vacation, we feel that *we have* to be here.

The warm night pulses through us, and the sound of the waves calms us, then a statement, “Would ya look at this. Muhfukkah holdin' up his beach Bible to hide that fucked up mug,” stops us in our tracks.

To our left is a group of tank top wearing douchebags, and they're laughing at the dumb comment.

Pilot turns to a black guy who has Allen Iverson cornrows. This guy might be the leader of this group, and we understand that something bad is about to happen.

“Forget it, Pilot,” we beg.

“You know why they call this muhfukkah 'Pilot' right?” the guy with the A.I. cornrows asks, then answers his own question, “Because after he came back all fucked up from Iraq, no TV show he acts in gets past the pilot stage.”

Again, the tank topped men enjoy this slice of ridicule, and as Pilot steps toward the group, the cornrow guy says, "Ay, Scarface, say hello to my little friend," then he grabs his dick. "I mean... big friend," he quickly corrects, and it's almost as though this tiny correction releases blood into the water, and Pilot follows the trail. "The fuck you gonna do? Muhfukkah look like a Chucky doll with PTSD," the taunter continues, and the chorus of laughs roars loud.

Pilot does retaliate this time, becoming more engaged than he was with the woman on the stairs.

*"Take a look to your left."*

Pilot points to the Mariasol.

"You gonna take me on a date, faggot?" the black guy asks, then for some reason, he licks his lips.

*"I can't. You're gonna be busy. You have a very intimate date planned with the 50 cal round that I have locked in that chamber right now."*

The crowd turns on the taunter, and unleashes an, "Ohhh," that makes the guy with the cornrows try to push forward, pointing at Pilot's hand, and saying, "I ain't afraid of no dude who carries around a Bible."

*"I'm carrying it around because I'm studying it. And you should be grateful for that. You should be happy that you didn't meet the version of me who didn't carry a Bible."*

"Seriously?" is all the guy can come up with.

*"Yes, seriously."*

"You gonna read us a sonnet?" the taunter scoffs, and only one guy in his crew laughs at this, but it's because this question reveals that the taunter never made it out of high school.

*"I'm going to say a prayer for you, and God will hear it. He protected me when I was sent to war, and right now, he's protecting you."*

"He ain't protect you, muhfukkah. Your face is fuckedddd up," the taunter taunts.

*"Why do you say that?"*

"Have you not looked in the mirror recently?"

*"I have. Have you?"*

It's silent for a long moment, then the taunter asks, "You're fucking with me right now, ain't you?"

*"No. I'm not fucking with you. God protected me when I was at war."*

"Agree to disagree," he says, but no one in his crew laughs.

*"Agree to disagree."*

Pilot extends out a hand, and it stays there. The black guy's hands remain at his side.

*"Shake my hand."*

The taunter looks at Pilot's extended hand, then back at his friends.

*"Either my hand is about to squeeze your hand..."*

With his Bible, Pilot points to the turret.

*"...or it's about to squeeze that trigger. And either way, I'm making contact with you. Of that, you can be certain."*

The black guy looks to the massive gun on the turret, then to Pilot, and he makes the wise decision- he reaches out and shakes Pilot's hand.

Pilot looks the taunter in the eyes, and their hands remain fused together.

*"I was saved, while I was saving you. I returned home, and this is how I'm repaid. I'm mocked, walking to my car. Look at my face. I'm deformed, because I traveled halfway around the world, to defend this place, where you treat me like shit, and every day, I get up on that turret behind you, and I defend this place, where you treat me like shit. God protected me, I protect you, and you ridicule us both."*

This skin-on-skin touch proves to the taunter that Pilot Abilene, flesh and blood, really is in front of him, holding his hand, just as he is in front of Pilot, holding Pilot's hand. This allows their shared slice of existence to become a mirror and this man sees that he and Pilot are standing in the same place, at the same time, despite one of them going off to war and facing the most severe horrors that this Earth can leverage against a man, while the other stayed at home, and continued on blissfully at peace because he was protected. They both spent their days in the sand, but they have distinctly different experiences regarding what happened during those days.

We stare at these two linked men, and we watch as a tear slides down the cheek of the man with cornrows. It's only a single tear, and it slices

down the man's face, just like Pilot's scar. The man shuts his eyes for a long second, then he says, "I'm sorry."

*"I forgive you."*

Pilot lets go of the man's hand, which rises up and wipes away the tear, before the man turns back to his silent group.

Pilot can't wipe away the embarrassing streak down the side of his face, so he keeps hold of his Bible, and we leave the pier with our hero best friend.

No one else speaks with Pilot on the way to the parking lot. We can't find the right words to tell him how thankful we are for his bravery. We choose to merely bear witness to it, and we understand that this is a story that we will tell when we return home, if we return home. This is an uncertainty that Pilot knows well. He's made it out alive before- he has the scars to prove it.

When we reach our vehicles, Pilot leans on his Firebird, and looks out to the red sunset.

*"Ya got the rest of the night off. Enjoy it."*

"You too, Pilot. See ya tomorrow, bright and early," we respond, then we get into our rental.

On our drive home, we keep replaying the most important moment of the day- that moment that we left the roof, and we interacted with the world. Pilot knew what to do when he was unexpectedly thrown into an adversarial situation, and he showed not only his star quality, but also a human quality that caught us in our chest and traveled out from our heart to the tips of our fingers. This was the first time that Boxer Santaros' steeple fingered tip-tap made sense. The energy we coursed with could only be metabolized through action.

Now, with new knowledge, we notice more about LA. The graffiti holds enhanced meaning. The rage of the Neo-Marxists paints the city. The armed soldiers on rooftops look like friends to us. The metal detector archways provide a necessary clairvoyance. The cameras affixed to everything become an asset.

After enduring the traffic, and watching night fall, we rush from our rental, into the motel, then we dash to our room.

With the deadbolt flipped, and a plastic cup of water in our hand, we start looking around, opening drawers, until we find it- the courtesy Bible.

Instead of Pilot's Bible- with its thin leather cover, and multicolored strings that can be used to mark various places- the Bible that the Motel 6 provides has a purple hardcover and only a single yellow ribbon to mark the reader's place. That yellow ribbon is tucked in this Bible, almost at the very end. We open The Bible to this marked place, and of course, we see that we've arrived at The Book of Revelation.

We read:

*"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to shew unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass, and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John, who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.*

*Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein... for the time is at hand."*

Almost like it burnt our skin, we toss the book away, because instead of the obtuse and asinine framing of Krysta Now's totally unrelatable screenplay, we're being spoken to directly, in very clear language, and we're receiving this message, not from a screenwriter/pornstar, but from God himself.

In Fallujah, God saved Pilot, and we were made in His image so maybe we can save Pilot too.

III-

THE MECHANICALS - JULY 1<sup>ST</sup> 2008

After waking up at 5 AM, LA time, on the first of July, we're unable to fall back asleep because in our dreams we see terrible images of destruction and pain.

In order to escape, we turn on our laptop, and find the part in *The Power* where we left off- with Tawna, Muriel, and Jericho inside the McBride's home- and we seek insight in Krysta's words:

**EXT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- NEXT**

Two BLACK SUBURBANS pull up in front of Tawna's house.

Tinted windows roll down and men wearing TURBANS holding AUTOMATIC WEAPONS lean out of the suburbans...

These men begin to unload a torrent of BULLETS into the front of the house.

**INT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- FAMILY ROOM -- NEXT**

The BULLETS rip through the FAMILY ROOM- shattering a LAMP, shredding WALLPAPER.

Muriel, Jericho, and the UPU2 officers run for cover... some reaching for their SIDEARMS as they bury their faces into the cheap shag carpet.

Tawna McBride remains frozen... unable to move. We hold on her for a slo-mo moment. She's backlit by a window, and she looks almost angelic... until she takes a BULLET TO THE CHEST... falling back, the crown of her

head shattering the window, splashing BLOOD onto the camera.

We look away from our laptop. This part doesn't make sense. Beyond the bizarre extremists trying to exterminate a six-day-old child, there's the fact that Tawna takes a bullet. When Krysta left the house after Boxer's freakout, Tawna was fine. Krysta tried to change history by throwing money at the problem, but she never told Tawna to use the money to buy protection or as the first month's rent at a new place.

With each passing moment of our "vacation," Krysta Now becomes a person that we intimately love with the same passion we had when we watched her make love, absent any intimacy.

A new question arises, *What good is it to be clairvoyant if you don't act on the information you've been gifted?*

We keep reading, realizing that Krysta might be rewriting her screenplay with her actions.

**EXT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- NEXT**

The gunmen drive off before any more UPU2 arrive.

**INT. 1400 WANITO PLACE -- FAMILY ROOM - NEXT**

Jericho rises to his feet and approaches the crib. The wall behind the crib is pocked with BULLET HOLES...

Jericho gets closer, and closer, and closer to the crib...

Jericho looks over the edge of the crib... and Baby Caleb stares up at Jericho, unharmed. He even lets out a giggle.

JERICHO

He's okay.

Suddenly, a LOUD FART erupts from the crib, causing the house to shake, creating an EARTHQUAKE.



Jericho turns to Muriel... as BOOKS and DISHES fall from shelves. MacPherson pulls himself up off the floor.

MACPHERSON

What the fuck is going on here?

The earthquake subsides. The UPU2 officers focus on Tawna... who lies lifeless.

Muriel rises to her feet. *So much decimation has happened in such a short amount of time.*

MURIEL

They'll be back soon- the earthquake is evidence that they didn't eliminate their target. We need to move baby Caleb far away from this house.

JERICHO

Where will he be safe?

Muriel closes her eyes tight, and touches her temples with a PINK CRYSTAL.

MURIEL

I see... a black farmhouse... and a Chinese woman who we must speak with.

Jericho lifts baby Caleb out of the crib.

JERICHO

You in, MacPherson?

MACPHERSON

My mother always told me... never trust a black farmhouse.

JERICO

The farmhouse is black, not the farmers. Black farmers are an urban legend, MacPherson.

MACPHERSON

I think I'm just going to go back to the Foxtrot, and I'm going to tell Jade about today, then see if I can get a hand job.

MURIEL

You in, Cane?

JERICO

I'm in... deep... real deep.

Jericho winks at Muriel.

**EXT. DESERT ROAD -- TWILIGHT**

A UPU2 CRUISER cuts through a stretch of virgin sand as it treks out into the desert. In the distance... we see a BLACK FARMHOUSE perched up on the crest of a hill.

**EXT. BLACK BARN -- MOMENTS LATER**

Jericho stands at the entrance to a LARGE BARN adjacent to the black farmhouse. He cradles BABY CALEB in his arms, with Muriel a step behind him.

Jericho knocks on the barn door... and a SMALL SLOT in the door opens... EYES PEERING OUT.

EYES

What's the password?

Jericho looks back to Muriel. She points at him.

JERICHO  
Jericho Fucking Cane.

The BARN DOOR slides open.

**INT. BLACK BARN -- NEXT**

The interior of the barn is filled with LARGE SNAKES that slither around the EXPOSED WOODEN BEAMS. A Chinese woman, SERPENTINE (20's or 30's or 40's), stands in the middle of the barn among the snakes.

SERPENTINE  
Hello, Jericho, Muriel, baby Caleb.  
My name is Serpentine.

JERICHO  
I've never seen you before in my  
life. How do you know our names?

SERPENTINE  
I know so much about you, and your  
mission.

Jericho sizes her up.

SERPENTINE (CONT'D)  
Don't look so scared Mistah Cane.

Jericho slowly turns his head, noticing a LARGE BOA CONSTRICTOR hissing as it slithers down a beam.

SERPENTINE (CONT'D)  
Do not fear da snake.

Jericho hands Caleb over to Muriel.

SERPENTINE (CONT'D)  
I see dat you have brought da child  
with you.

MURIEL

Is this the one we've waited for?

SERPENTINE

Has he produced a bowel movement yet?

MURIEL

No.

Jericho continues watching the boa as it slithers to the floor.

SERPENTINE

I have felt him pass gas.

JERICHO

No one rocks the state of California  
like baby Caleb.

SERPENTINE

Da Earth shakes when he passes gas,  
so he is da chosen one.

JERICHO

If that's all it takes to be the  
chosen one, I think my Uncle Pete is  
also the chosen one.

MURIEL

Yes, how can you be sure that this  
child is the chosen one? What proof  
can you give us?

SERPENTINE

Let me look into his eyes.

Before she hands over the baby, Muriel searches Serpentine's eyes- their long almond shape and sharp black eyeliner inspiring a sinister *knowing*.

Boxer looks to the boa that is now climbing the rafters again...

SERPENTINE

You have my word. *I* will not hurt him.

Muriel steps forward so that Serpentine can see the baby up close.

SERPENTINE (CONT'D)

May I hold him?

Muriel looks over at Jericho... who reluctantly nods his head... then Muriel hands baby Caleb over to Serpentine.

Serpentine looks into the baby's eyes, then begins to chant something in Chinese.

She holds Caleb up in the air... then a HUGE BOA CONSTRICTOR drops down from one of the ceiling beams, and its massive jaws open impossibly wide, then seal around the baby, consuming him.

MURIEL

NOOOOO! Caleb!

THE FUCKING BOA SWALLOWS BABY CALEB DOWN INTO ITS REPTILIAN GULLET... A LARGE BLOB begins inching its way down the snake's body...

Jericho pulls his gun and aims it at the snake.

JERICHO

I want my baby back.

Serpentine then throws her body in front of the snake.

SERPENTINE

No! Wait!

Just then... a second LUMP appears in the boa, and travels up to the boa's mouth... then a FART erupts out of the snake's mouth. The entire barn begins to shake with another EARTHQUAKE.

Jericho puts his hand over his nose.

JERICHO

That big ass snake just burped a fart!

The BOA CONSTRICTOR BEGINS TO CONVULSE ON THE GROUND... The remaining blob in the snake's midsection starts to undulate... as BABY CALEB BEGINS TO FART HIS WAY OUT weakening the snakes' insides.

Seconds later... one of baby Caleb's arms PUNCHES THROUGH THE REPTILIAN SKIN... spraying blood all over Serpentine and Muriel.

Baby Caleb RIPS OPEN THE SNAKE'S GULLET FROM INSIDE and peers his head out... he's laughing maniacally. He now looks like he's almost TWO YEARS OLD.

Muriel scoops up Caleb... as the boa constrictor convulses on the floor one last time and then DIES.

SERPENTINE

HE IS DA CHOSEN ONE!

Baby Caleb rips one more fart and the Earth shakes once again.

We put the screenplay to the side, and it's now abundantly clear that Boxer isn't the false prophet- that would be Krysta now.

Krysta's screenplay makes us think about the Infinite Monkey Theorem which states a monkey, at a typewriter, given an unlimited number of chances, would almost surely reproduce, word for word, a great text... but it would take a *long fucking time*.

Unfortunately for Krysta Now, she isn't that one golden monkey.

*It was the best of times, it was the blurst of times.*

Since we still have some time before we need to leave for the pier, we check to make sure our alarm is still set, then we try to get a little more sleep. Despite our hunger-pains, we drift off without any trouble.

We dream of a house full of lumpy carpets, and each time an edge is lifted, snakes are revealed underfoot.

We dream of rows and rows of farm crops, on fire, until military jets drop red powder on them, extinguishing the flames, destroying the food.

We dream of DREAM, and it's a sexy dream, and we wake up terrified that DREAM will write a poem about the subconscious sexual assault we committed on her this morning.

Our alarm still hasn't gone off, we could try to get another ten minutes of sleep, but instead, we decide to get ready to go back to the pier.

We shower, then cover ourselves in suntan lotion. We gulp down about two liters of water from the tap, then return to the room, and turn off our shrieking alarm.

There isn't even a coffee maker in our room so we have to go downstairs to the front desk to pump ourselves some stale tasting generic java.

With our styrofoam cup of black liquid in hand, we walk out into the sweltering heat, and a small amount of dread rises in us as we realize it's already this unbearable out and the sun is far from its peak.

It isn't until we're sitting in traffic that we look over to the passenger seat of our FluidKar and realize that we brought both the motel's Bible, and our laptop which contains *The Power*. We grabbed these items without much thought, and their presence forces us to backtrack to make sure we really did snag them on our way out and they didn't just appear here.

A faint memory of using the laptop-Bible combination as a coffee tray glimmers in the far reaches of our mind, and it's enough to keep us from

panicking. A thought- that the rift is affecting our memory- is quickly squelched because it's too troublesome to unpack.

The brutal LA traffic gives us time to wince-down the Motel 6 coffee, then with our FluidKar unmoving, we confront what's in our front passenger seat.

As impenetrable as *The Book of Revelation* seems to us, *The Power* holds the same frustrating intrigue. Yes, it's a piece of shit script, but it's a piece of shit script that *might* have some really prescient revelations about the world we live in.

Even before we visited the west coast, we knew that one of the scariest moments for a movie studio in LA is when a room full of people all read an incomprehensible and monetarily irresponsible screenplay, then nod their heads in agreement that they're in possession of a work of genius, merely because they're too afraid to admit they have no idea what the fuck they're reading. Each executive or producer can approve a plan that is counter to their goals and best interests, merely because they're afraid to be the typical studio dickhead who dampens an auteur's vision. They fear that everyone else in the room understands the work, and they're the odd person out, too dumb to get the point. In this situation, the movie can get the greenlight, only to be produced to near disastrous results.

Finally, the traffic relents and as long as we're moving, things seem okay.

We observe the world around us, and no one seems to be crazy outside of LA norms. The zombies haven't arrived, the locusts haven't claimed the day, the sky hasn't rained frogs, yet.

We have time to fix the potential-chaos, so we vow to pay attention, to be a good partner to Pilot, and to give everyone the benefit of the doubt because the absurd can become the norm faster than one may think.

When we reach the parking lot, we try to find Pilot's Firebird so we can park next to it, but eventually, we just settle on taking an available spot.

Both our laptop and the Bible get left in the car. We understand that Pilot knows what's going to happen already so he can cherry pick the moments and multitask- while we cannot. We need to pay attention because Pilot alone is unable to save the world, and our entire adult life has been characterized by fractured attention so this unbroken time on the turret can be a bit of training.



Passing by where the prior night's altercation took place, we wonder if we've reached a point in our friendship that we can ask Pilot about his scar. We know the publicized story of what happened, but there's been a lot of discussion about how it seems, "Too good to be true," and it's well known that the United States' propaganda machine possesses a power to rewrite history, even as it's happening. This is the level of discourse we're at- war injuries can be described as too good to be believed.

Just as we didn't ask Pilot about his Bible, and instead waited for a moment where discussion of it came up organically, we decide that we'll await the time that someone else asks him about the scar, then we will listen carefully. We've become a good listener- a content listener- for once, we aren't just waiting for our turn to talk.

Looking up at the Mariasol, we can see that Pilot is already on the turret, and thankfully he's reading his Bible. We had this tiny fear that when we looked atop that yellow roof, we'd see Pilot aiming that rifle, and we'd hear a cracking pop. We've remained keenly aware that next to that laptop we dutifully watch each day, there's a high powered weapon which has a single purpose- to eliminate threats in the designated sector. Knowing this bastardizes our initial view of Pilot Abilene looking through the sight- he wasn't combing the beach to protect us, he was regarding each and every one of us as possible threats, and he was protecting Utopia 3.

Pilot is both the protector and the gunman.

Moments spawn dualities, as realities fracture.

We pass through the Mariasol, and we briefly consider ordering breakfast, but they aren't officially opened yet- Pilot merely left the door unlocked for us- so we invest in the idea of another working lunch.

The moment we climb onto the roof, we can't help but notice that Pilot is turned to us so that we see the scarred side of his face, and any suspicions we had about him are put to bed. He bled for us while we relaxed. He carried a rifle for us before, and he looked out of the sight on it, and scanned a sandy terrain. Never once did we question his motives then, so why do it now?

We sit down on the turret, and the laptop's screen is black, so Pilot reclines, reading on the job.

"Good book?" we ask- a stupid joke to start the morning.

*"Wild book... the Book of Revelation."*

"The greatest blockbuster of all time."

"You've read it?"

"Sure, it's... a lot to deal with."

*"It's a tough one to crack. Massive in scope- a thousand years of this... a thousand years of that. That's not how it's going to happen. It's not with-"*

"-serpents, lambs, archangels, beasts, and regular harp-playing angels," we list.

*"It seems like such work to organize. Mankind would be way more efficient when it comes to our extinction."*

"Quick and painless," we say, then a jolt ripples through us when we hear the electronic buzz of the screen turning on. What we see on the laptop is the type of content we've been blissfully free from until this point.

We've been watching security cameras, and dashcams, and WiFi-enabled TVs, but for the first time, the feed we're watching is borrowed from a cable news channel. This is a simulcast of what the citizens of LA are watching on their TV or laptop, and this makes what we're seeing feel cheap, and inauthentic.

An ethnically ambiguous woman wearing a unisex blazer reads from a teleprompter, "Three days before the anniversary of the tragedy in Abilene Texas Senator, and White House hopeful Bobby Frost has landed at LAX with his wife, USIDent director, Nana Mae Frost. They're being met on the tarmac by their daughter, Madeline Frost-Santaros, who has been campaigning at various Treer Industries events in the past week, showing strong support for green energy." Corresponding with this news copy, footage rolls of Bobby Frost- a beady-eyed man with salt and pepper gray hair- and his pretty, if not a little Stepfordy, brunette wife, Nana Mae. Meeting them on the ground, wearing a bottom-lip-heavy pout, is a tall, beautiful blonde that we recall seeing on the cover of *Teen People* with the byline, "Madeline Frost- Bringing Sexy Back to the Republican Party."

The report continues, "After touring the Utopia 3 facilities, the Frost family will stay in LA until the big 4th of July downtown launch of the Treer mega-zeppelin that's currently being referred to as 'The Jenny von Westphalen.' The Frosts will join the Westphalens on their inaugural flight as the special guest of Treer Industries. Many believe this is an olive branch being extended by Inga von Westphalen after federal assistance for Treer Tower 2 was revoked, and USIDent relocated to the Caltrans building."

As the footage of the Frost family on the tarmac continues to run, we take a close look at Nana Mae- we really study her dark lipstick, her pinned back hair, and her navy-black outfit with a peaking collar that practically touches her ears. She could not look more villainous if she tried.

The report continues, “This will be the first tour that Bobby Frost has taken of California since being announced as the Vice Presidential candidate of Tommy Eliot. After Eliot's much talked about California primary loss to Republican hopeful Philip Davidson, allegations of voter fraud were abound, and eventually brought about a nearly unheard of primary 'do over.' After Davidson picked Dick Lynch to be his Vice Presidential running mate, to reinvigorate his base, Eliot followed suit and selected Bobby Frost. The Republican party is watching this primary closely, as whoever wins California will be pushed over the 1,237 delegates required to become the Republican presidential nominee.”

The Frost trio makes their way through a sea of signs that read, “ELIOT/FROST ‘08.”

“Tommy Eliot is on the opposite side of the country currently, meeting with previously pledged delegates to solidify their allegiance after anonymous reports began to surface of possible defectors.”

Pilot picks up his Bible, instead of watching the Frosts bask in the attention of their supporters.

“Already?” we ask.

*“So fake.”*

“What is? He's in a presidential race so it's not surprising that his supporters are excited,” we say.

*“Post-9/11, how many tarmacs have you been on without a plane ticket?”*

We pause to count, but there's nothing to count because what Pilot is describing is an impossibility. “None,” we say, and suddenly we see the event for what it is- a carefully planned, well-orchestrated, permit-secured, actor-littered, faux-supporter circle-jerk. Of course a bunch of random, security-threatening, mouth-breathers wouldn't get carted out to meet one of the most powerful men in America. Hell, we couldn't even get through LAX with a can of Pepsi in our coat pocket.

We watch the Frost family get into a stretch limo, and the news report is cut off, mid-sentence, in favor of a camera *inside* the vehicle. Nana Mae is fixing her pulled-back brown hair, using the screen like a mirror.

“What the fuck,” we exhale, leaning toward the screen, “If Nana Mae is the USIDent director, why are they recording her actions as well? Who’s the one putting this footage together for us?”

*“USIDent collects information.”*

“Alright, but still. There’s the whole question of why she’d let footage of her own shady dealings ever be recorded in the first place.”

There’s a long silence on the turret. Pilot is working something out.

*“Because... her job is keeping the country from blowing up and our job is to prevent the apocalypse. Maybe she’s not excluding herself because she knows what she’s doing is evil. Maybe she has so much information that she too knows we’re at the brink of destruction, and she can’t be sure if she’s doing something to contribute to it. Above all else, Nana Mae Frost has a deep compulsion to establish and sustain order. This is her greatest strength, as well as her greatest weakness.”*

As Nana Mae finishes reviewing her appearance, Madeline points at the camera, and says, “How about using some of these dumb things to find my damn husband?”

“He’s on location, I keep telling you,” Bobby says.

“No. He’s not. I called Vaughn, and his PR lady, and his chef, and *both* his personal trainers. None of them have heard anything. Boxer has just disappeared,” Madeline whines.

Bobby seems to understand that this impacts him just as much as it does Madeline, and he sighs, “Well... shit.”

“I told you marrying him would backfire,” Nana Mae nearly sings, then bemoans, “Fucking actors. They’re all nuts. Transient narcissists with paranoid delusional fantasies.”

“What delusions? Like that his mother in law is always watching him?” Bobby jokes, then shoots Madeline a look and he earns himself a smile.

“These actors, they always find themselves next to some beautiful moron, and it’s obvious where that goes,” Nana Mae says, and this wipes the smile off Madeline’s face.

Bobby puts his arm around his daughter- a protective gesture- maybe to protect her from Boxer’s careless absence, maybe to protect her from her own mother. “We’ll find him. We just need to retrace our steps,” Bobby says. “Where do you remember last seeing him?”

“Daddy, he’s a person, not a set of car keys,” Madeline responds.

“I know where my car keys are right now. You don’t know where your husband is, so maybe you could learn a thing or two from your old man,” Bobby says, and his politician charm wins Madeline over, so she answers his question, “Well, you know how I was in the Southland earlier in the week before I flew to meet you? We were at the Santa Monica Pier on a campaign stop, and Boxer was right alongside me. We were invited by Baron, and we were gonna skip it, but your BFF, Vaughn, insisted that we attend.”

“Was it a dope party?” Bobby asks, in dad-rap-talk.

“It turned out we were walking into one of those timeshare Trojan horses where you’re promised a great time, then you show up there and have to listen to pitches and product details and it was just very, very bullshit.”

“That does sound very bullshit. Why did Vaughn make you go?” Bobby responds.

“He was all, ‘Blah, blah, Fluid Karma is the future of this country’s energy policy - it’s what keeps us from becoming Canada. Learn it, and love it- or your father will lose the election and it will be your fault, then America will get invaded by Mexico, and we’ll all have to learn how to enjoy soccer. Canada will invade from the North and bring all their shitlib policies so your best friend can sue you if you say she’s too fat to wear a two piece.’”

“Damn, he’s good,” Bobby marvels sincerely, then focuses on his daughter, saying, “My dear, you need to remember, the Republicans are a few points away from winning California for the first time since 1988. Getting the backing of Treer Industries is our only way to do that.” This is a sociopolitical lesson within the tragedy.

“Daddy, if you ever send me out on a stage to discuss quantum teleportation, I swear I will tell the crowd about your drinking problem,” Madeline responds.

“My campaign is co-sponsored by Budweiser. My drinking problem is purely a business move,” Bobby assures her.

Madeline shakes her head, then says, “Anyway, at the event, we were going through all this Treer propaganda, then we had to watch that creepy little guy, Baron-”

“-Baron is an American treasure,” Nana Mae points out, half-listening to the story.

“Then why does he dress like he's in a Russian new wave band?” Madeline asks.

“At least he doesn't still wear lip gloss, post-trend,” Nana Mae snips, as Madeline presses her lips together, then counters, “Ugh, can you ever stop? Ever? Don't you have a toilet cam to watch?”

“So, you were at the pier...” Bobby says, trying to play middleman to set things back on track.

Madeline picks up her story, “...and Baron was thanking Santa Monica for allowing use of the Pacific Ocean and the pier, then he made us participate in this scavenger hunt. They buried all of these wireless energy antenna ball thingamajigs up and down El Porto beach and we had to go digging for them. Since Boxer is pretty much part golden retriever, he got really into it... and he was sprinting down the beach, pushing kids out of the way, so I couldn't keep up. And, uh,” Madeline puts the back of her hand up to her glossed lips, then quietly says, “...that was the last time I saw him. I thought it was a joke at first- his disappearance and all- but it wasn't. I thought he'd call- but he didn't- and now... here we are... and where is he?”

“Honey, could you get me all of the footage for the beach on that day?” Bobby asks Nana Mae, and this is the first empathetic and proactive measure we've ever seen Bobby Frost initiate.

“Of course I can get the footage,” Nana Mae responds, then adds, “But wouldn't we all just prefer to assume that the tide swallowed Boxer?”

After this bummer of a moment, the feed switches back to the Neo-Marxist festival, and we begin to feel pretty hopeless.

Last night's party is visible in the trash that's strewn everywhere- a side effect of the Neo-Marxists being so used to their mother cleaning up after them. Instead of watching this group through a sight, we seem to be watching footage that Fortunio is shooting with his MiniDV camera. Maybe, after he agreed to not give up the Boxer footage, he realized that the Eliot/Frost campaign might like to buy footage of the biggest Neo-Marxist event of the summer.

Krysta is walking slightly in front of Fortunio's camera, and we realize they're shooting a segment for Krysta's TV show, *NOW*. “Neo-Marxists are,

like, gross and stinky,” is a segment theme that most of her viewers will likely get behind.

Boxer hasn't appeared on camera, and it's likely that he remains in the black barn, because these Neo-Marxists would definitely pester him to watch their audition tape if they knew he was here.

Krysta walks past the pop-up weed T-shirt stores which are being disassembled, and eventually, she chooses to stop at a small cluster of Winnebagos.

Fortunio's lens gravitates toward a table covered in garnished soy cubes on toothpicks, and just as we have been skipping meals, it seems that Fortunio's fatboy desperation has forced him to commune with Neo-Marxists.

“Is this food or human flesh?” Fortunio asks, zooming in on the tray of cubes.

“With socialism, that's always the question eventually,” Krysta says, her hand entering the frame, then picking up a cube. Fortunio pans to Krysta's face, and we watch a girl who we've seen rim a man's asshole, put a piece of tofu in her mouth, then begrudgingly swallow it with a grimace. “I'm sooo glad I don't have a gag reflex,” Krysta says, grabbing another cube.

“You're wasting your talents. Go back to porno. Remember when we had such a good life and I was booking you to blow dudes? Never once did we-” Fortunio is cut off, as a chubby woman with a formless haircut steps in front of Krysta and invites herself into the conversation, declaring, “-pornography creates a male-driven-”

“-not listening. Already. Already, I am not listening,” Fortunio talks over her.

“-unrealistic body types are being perpetuated-” the chubby woman continues unabated.

“-it is truly amazing how much I do not care, like, I've transcended not caring and entered into a new level of apathy where you could be providing valuable information, but your existence- in my mind- is negligible at best because of how useless you intrinsically are to society as a whole,” Fortunio talks over the woman's rant, while his free hand enters the frame and provides a thumbs down next to the chubby chick's awful haircut.

“Let's just get some of this pretend-food in us, then immediately leave these nerds,” Krysta says, continuing to lay out a plan, since she got Fortunio into this situation in the first place.

A door swings open on one of the Winnebagos, and Fortunio whip-pans to Dion and DREAM who are dancing as they leave the camper. No music plays on the feed, it's only Fortunio's chant of, "No, please no. Please no," on the audio.

Dion notices Fortunio's reaction, and he looks like he's about to get angry, but then he does a double take upon seeing Krysta.

"No way!" Dion yells, then does a running-in-place dance.

Krysta goes from disgusted to blushing in seconds.

"I'm a huge fan. Anytime someone asks, 'Who rocks the cock the best?' I put my foot down, and say, 'Nobody rocks the cock like Krysta Now,'" Dion declares, and for a moment, we actually like him.

"Thank you," Krysta responds bashfully.

"You tiny Jewish girls sure do know how to drain a black python," Dion states, with the utmost respect.

"Uh, excuse me? I'm standing right here," DREAM says.

Understanding what he has to do, Fortunio says, "DREAM, forget about them, I want to tell you what a big fan of your folk albums I am."

"Folk is shit," DREAM declares.

"You said it, mama," Fortunio responds supportively.

"We now only perform capital-core," she adds.

"Releasing a capitalism-centric album was my idea!" Krysta whines.

"Ass-fuck capitalism!" Dion yells, and we hate him again.

"We're completely original in all ways," DREAM declares, "Plus the album isn't the only thing we have going. We're publishing a memoir of free-associative thought, we have our wage gap blog, and we're in final negotiations to bring our tantric dance revue to off-off-Broadway."

"Tantric dance?" Fortunio asks, totally abandoning the lie that he's a fan.

DREAM throws him a condescending look, then says, "It's like dancing and banging, simultaneously. You should try the first sometime, then you might be able to experience the second a little more often."

The video feed switches to a conference room, and we feel physical and mental relief at this reprieve. DREAM and Dion are the least-tolerable people in a sea of intolerable Neo-Marxists.

Senator Frost, Nana Mae, and Madeline are all assembled in what appears to be a lounge, high enough above the city of LA that the view from the picture window is mostly just fog from the Tidal Generator.



This is another time jump. We're still in the past on this feed.

A door opens, and in walks a well-dressed man in his mid-fifties who looks distinguished enough that his age is an asset.

"Vaughn, buddy," Bobby says, standing up, then shaking the man's hand. We recall this name from Madeline's story in the limo. We believe that Vaughn was called to this meeting for information regarding Boxer's disappearance, yet once the meeting gets down to business, Vaughn leads it, instead of being grilled.

"Tomorrow night, Baron von Westphalen is holding a pre-launch party up in the Hills, in his honor, and it is imperative that we all show up," Vaughn says, with a pleasant New Orleans accent painting his words. His eyes travel across the faces of the three Frosts at the conference table. His focus remains on Nana Mae, and we realize that this message, mostly, is directed at her.

Nana Mae shakes her head, and provides a review, "I don't trust him, Vaughn. I have reason to suspect he's funding the Neo-Marxists. He's playing us like a fiddle."

"On the way over here, you called him a national treasure," Bobby hops in, treating his wife like the detriment many voters see her as.

"You can be a national treasure and still be a piece of shit," Nana Mae says, which might also be one of the Eliot/Frost campaign slogans.

"I understand your instincts are good, Nana Mae..." Vaughn responds cautiously, then reminds her, "...but we simply don't have a choice. We can't win this election without an endorsement from the von Westphalens. Think about it. If we don't make it clear that we have the full support of the people who are supporting us with a power supply, then the electorate could think that Baron's loyalties could lean elsewhere. I mean, even if we *do* win, but the von Westphalens aren't in our corner, China or Japan could come in with an attractive offer to them, and we'd have to go to war to get Fluid Karma back. It would be war-for-oil all over again."

"War is good," Nana Mae says, "War is such a booming business that when Hustler saw the internet was taking over porn, they tried to think of a new way to monetize people getting fucked, hard, and they chose tanks. That's a sign of the times. We need to pay attention to these things." Nana Mae bobs her head to the left, then to the right, and adds, "That being said, I did watch Baron's meeting with Hillary, and it did not go well. Especially after she insulted his mother."

“That’s a poor communicator, speaking with a company of poor communicators, which is why we have to get in front of them,” Bobby explains, “Inga sounds like her news conferences should be scored to sad violin music, Baron sounds like a mad scientist with a speech impediment, and Serpentine is still trying to master the pronunciation of any word beginning in ‘th.’”

Vaughn hops in, “Don’t discredit her just because of this old-guard idea that we all need to sound like John Wayne. Serpentine is just as much a member of Treer as Inga herself.”

Nana Mae sings, “They are setting a trap,” and everyone is quiet for a moment. When no one provides a counterpoint, Nana Mae gestures to the window, then says, “Baron cannot be trusted. He wants to destroy us. A block from here, he leveled an entire strip mall to build that mega-zeppelin hangar.”

Bobby arches his neck, trying to find the hangar, then muses, “That is... very cool. I think... I’d like a tour of that shit.”

“That blimp is a death trap, and you know it,” Nana Mae states.

“It’s a mega-zeppelin, Nana Mae. Don’t call it a blimp,” Vaughn requests, and we know he’s doing this because the Frosts are among Baron’s guests for the launch on the 4th.

“Y’all got any videos of this super-blimp? Does it have machine guns?” Bobby asks, in the most Texas way possible.

“Um, guys, I’d love to talk evil alliances all day, but we have a TV interview in a half hour, and they’re going to ask me about Boxer,” Madeline reminds everyone.

“I’ll prepare a statement for you, and you won’t have to face those cameras,” Vaughn assures her.

Nana Mae, getting comfortable, asks, “So, Vaughn, during the little Easter egg hunt Treer held, where were you?”

We don’t know if she’s checked the footage or not, but we certainly know she has it, and this makes her the most powerful person in this meeting.

Instead of getting Vaughn’s answer, the feed returns to the footage from Fortunio’s MiniDV camera. They’ve escaped the Neo-Marxists, and they’re back inside the barn. It’s curious we’re still watching from Fortunio’s POV, instead of from the camera inside the barn.

In the center of Fortunio's unsteady frame is Boxer, sitting in a wheelchair. He's freshly tattooed, and looks bigger than ever because of the gauze wrapped around his torso. He's sitting in the wheelchair, hunched over, but he's not speaking or reacting to anything around him. It's obvious that a dose of Liquid Karma is pumping through him.

Fortunio hands Jimmy the camera, then gets Boxer's hoodie and helps him put it on.

"How long until he recovers?" Krysta asks.

"It depends on how big of a pussy he is," we hear Jimmy respond.

Krysta begins pushing the wheelchair out of the barn, while Fortunio mans the door.

Jimmy follows them, mostly filming Krysta's butt cheeks, but he performs a quick zoom-out when we hear Serpentine say, "After the Liquid Karma fades, he will be stronger than ever. He is da chosen one. Chosen to wear da armor of God."

The camera trails across a long stretch of grass, then settles on Serpentine, who stands on the porch of the farmhouse, smoking her signature Cruella de Vil cigarette.

"He got any superpowers?" Fortunio asks, approaching Serpentine.

After exhaling a snaking tendril of smoke, Serpentine says, "When da moment is upon us, da tattoo for da winning religion will bleed da blood of da serpent."

Fortunio rolls his eyes, and responds, "The winning religion? You make this out to be some sort of competition."

"Of course it is, you fool!" Serpentine yells, then she points back toward LA, "Now go! Follow da path before you!"

"Okay. What path do you suggest we follow?" Fortunio continues to prod her.

"Da path to end all suffering," Serpentine responds, then she walks into the farmhouse.

Fortunio shrugs, and Krysta struggles to push the wheelchair through the uneven grass, toward the car.

Jimmy doesn't follow them, and instead turns the camera toward his own face.

The feed hops to a security camera scoped perimeter of what has to be the Neo-Marxist headquarters. In the upper portion of the feed, we see scummy looking shitbags lurking on the balconies, and below them, the

building is covered in posters that say things like, “Resist Capitalism” and, “Don’t UPU where you sleep” and, “Fuck you, Dad!” It’s a *real* secret hideout.

We see that Zora’s truck is parked in the alley next to the headquarters, and we don’t hear what Zora says to Ronald as she gets out of the truck, but we can see her giving strict instructions to him. There’s a lot of finger-pointing, and to end the string of threats, she kisses her left bicep.

After this display, Zora enters the compound, and instead of watching to see if Ronald unties his brother and flees, the feed bounces from camera-to-camera on a system that the Neo-Marxists likely set up so they can know if a raid is coming. We presume these interior cameras run on the USIDeath network, yet we’re able to watch the feed without issue which means either our feed bridges USIDent and USIDeath, or USIDeath isn’t routing outside of USIDent at all, and Nana Mae just wants the Neo-Marxists to believe it is. Complex dualities no longer phase us. We understand the stunning power of the person providing this feed, so an aggressive deconstruction of *how* it happens is wasted brainpower.

As Zora finally reaches the core of the compound, we’re confronted by a space that’s a mix of Andy Warhol’s Factory and just a normal T-shirt making factory.

“DREAM! Dion! I need some help with the captive in my possession!” Zora yells.

As though they time-traveled from Marxchella, DREAM and Dion climb down a ladder from an upper-level, lofted area.

Both of them have slack posture, like they’re teenagers being forced to help bring in the groceries.

“Come on. Come on. The revolution will be televised so you’ll want to look your best,” Zora reminds them.

“We’re performance-hungover from exposing our souls onstage at Marxchella this weekend,” DREAM explains.

“Oh, yes, you must be sooo sweepy from doing fun things at a festival while I was drugging, and illegally transporting a UPU2 over state lines,” Zora responds, as though she’s speaking with a baby.

Again, we watch a hopscotch of cameras, until the trio reaches the truck. They pull Roland Taverner’s disgustingly wet and bound body off the truck bed, while Ronald follows Zora’s instructions and remains in the front passenger seat, his shaved head against the window glass. The feed

momentarily switches to the dashcam, and in the same way that we noticed Boxer would tap the tips of his fingers together, we watch Roland's raised hands become fists, then he opens both fists, splaying out his fingers. We can't figure out what he's doing, but it's almost as though he's seeking constant confirmation that he's not also the guy being carried into the Neo-Marxist compound. Someone really should have explained the concept of twins to this poor bastard.

The feed clicks back to the interior of the Neo-Marxist headquarters, as they haul Roland inside, then untie him so he can take a shower.

The moment his arms are free, we see Roland's muscles tense, and it seems like he's about to fuck these Neo-Marxists up worse than the history of Marxist policies have fucked up well-meaning populations across the globe, but then Dion drives a syringe of red Liquid Karma into Roland's neck, and the tension immediately eases. This is how they're going to get him cleaned off. Roland will get a junkie shower, while high on a drug he regularly does, but not on his own volition.

Zora heads back out to the truck while Dream and Dion drag Roland toward the bathroom. They begin to argue about what should be done with him once he's clean. Dion's opinion seems to be, "Interrogate him," while DREAM's opinion is, "Let's try out our new material on him as a dress rehearsal for later."

Once Roland is in the bathroom, the feed flips to the truck's dashcam, as Zora appears in the far edge of the frame, and it sounds like she says, "Ronald, baby. We're going to go into your new home, and get you ready."

Ronald has the window rolled up, so it takes Zora rapidly tapping one of her knuckles on it for her presence to be acknowledged.

Understanding that he has no choice, Ronald pops open the door, leaving the truck, then he obediently follows Zora inside the compound. They have Roland kidnapped and vulnerable, so Ronald can't run away from this challenge. He knows nothing of this world, besides the fact that his brother is in trouble, so he seems to focus on what he's sure of.

"Today is a big day. We're going to do some great things, and your brother will be very proud of you," Zora says, understanding the carrot that he's following.

"I'd like to have a conversation with him," Ronald says politely.

"You will. Soon. Right now he's doing Liquid Karma in our loft and you don't want to blow his buzz."

"I can't imagine how one could maintain a buzz surrounded by Neo-Marxists," Ronald says, climbing the stairs behind Zora.

"That's a very real problem in the Neo-Marxist community," Zora freely admits, "Sometimes you just want to relax in your LSD trip, but you can't because your friend is cawing like a hawk while working on their one-woman show about how mamma birds only make seventy cents on the dollar compared to poppa birds."

Inside the compound, the feed flicks from camera-to-camera, as Ronald tries not to say anything at all because it will result in Zora sharing her thoughts or feelings.

When the final door is thrown open, Zora holds out her arms, then says, "Ronald, welcome to the real utopia!"

"Wow, it somehow manages to look even shittier in here than it does from the outside," Ronald says, looking around at the bowling pins with Presidential masks atop them, and the terrible graffiti everywhere.

DREAM walks out of the bathroom, and snarls at Ronald, then asks Zora, "Another?"

"He'll be who you're performing for," Zora says, and Ronald winces at this astutely.

"You're in for a treat," DREAM assures Ronald, "We just played Marxchella..."

Ronald doesn't react to this information at all.

"Heard of it?" DEAM snarls.

"If I say yes, will you promise not to discuss it further?" Ronald asks.

"Oh, sure. Of course I won't discuss the fact that I, along with my Afro-American boyfriend, got over ten thousand signatures- most of them real names- in support of our battle against Proposition 69."

We turn to Pilot, and ask, "What's Proposition 69? Are they trying to regulate Krysta's work? Is it that condom law?"

*"Prop69, to Krysta- and to you, seemingly- has one meaning and one meaning only. To everyone else, it's a proposition on the ballot to unrestrict the powers of USIDent. All of L.A. is under USIDent watch- not news to you- but you have to understand that Proposition 69 would expand the initiative into a colossal big brother think tank that could finally operate out in the open. It would give them rights to watch any camera, for any*

*reason, and they'd have permission to delete any and all footage that could be considered a threat to national security. From what you can see here, on this screen, everything that is suggested in Prop69 has already been implemented, so the measure is all about having it on the books. No one can bring up a wrongdoing if it's already officially stated as being 'fine.' The politicians believe now is the time that this shit has to be pushed through, but it probably won't be."*

"So why don't they continue as-is, then wait for a terrorist attack to bundle it together with common sense laws?" we ask.

*"Exactly. They'll always be able to do that if it doesn't pass this year. Prop69 will reappear again, under a different name, and the people who were so vigilant about P69 won't notice P88 because they already thought they cut off the dragon's head, only to find it grew back in duplicate."*

We notice that, at some point while discussing Prop69, the feed has switched to Fortunio at the Hermosa Beach house.

Again, we've lost time. We don't look at our watch because we don't want to truly know if the time-suck was done via editing, or if, in real-life, we traveled forward in time. We look to the sky and see a swirling, galaxy-like rift in the space-time continuum, and instead of asking a question, we state, "Days are getting shorter."

*"Are the nights getting longer?"*

We don't know how to answer this, and it might be lyrics to a song, so we just choose to accept that the mere concept of time now seems much less linear than it did prior to our vacation. Before, in a cubicle, we were able to watch time tick-tick-tick away in a predictable consistency that felt like a relief when everything else was like sand slipping through our fingers.

We focus on the screen, and see Fortunio sitting in his bedroom, still wearing the same clothes he had on at Marxchella. He seems to be channel surfing, but we can't see what he's watching because we're most-likely watching him from the TV's camera. He has his remote raised to us, like a weapon, but he drops it when his cell phone rings.

"Hello?" Fortunio says, answering the call.

"Hello, is this Fortunio Balducci?" a familiar German-accented voice can be heard responding crystal clear on the tapped line.

"Yeah. Who's this?" Fortunio asks.

"Inga von Westphalen."

"Oh, fuck right off, Jimmy. I know this is you. Your impression sucks," Fortunio says, smirking, "You sound like you should be dropping James Bond in a vat of acid."

"Mr. Balducci, I've contacted you with nothing but respect, so I ask that you return the courtesy," Inga requests, and the authority in her voice makes Fortunio sit up straight. "You're right. I apologize, Ms. von Westphalen. How may I help you?" he responds, putting a hand to his forehead, knowing he fucked up.

"I've been informed that you have some new house guests," Inga continues.

"I... I do," Fortunio admits, staring directly into the camera we're watching him on.

"Fate has dealt you a winning hand, Mr. Balducci. Are you ready to up the ante?" Inga asks.

"Depends on who I'm playing with," Fortunio responds, now enjoying this conversation because it's speaking his language.

"The Neo-Marxists have taken a hostage. His name is Officer Roland Taverner of Hermosa Beach, California. I need you to facilitate a meeting between Mr. Taverner's impostor and Mr. Santaros," Inga says.

"What do you mean his 'impostor?'" Fortunio asks, looking lost.

"Mr. Taverner had been leaking internal UPU2 conduct memos to the Neo-Marxists. He was caught doing so and in turn, a deal had been brokered that if Mr. Taverner gave authorities a list of the Neo-Marxists he was working with, his record would be wiped clean and he would be able to retain his cruiser and his field duties. Once this news hit the USIDeath network, it spread like wildfire, and concerned parties took Roland hostage. Now, there is an impostor who is working Roland's beat, and we need him to meet Mr. Santaros," Inga lays it out, and we're riveted.

"Why?" Fortunio asks dully.

"The impostor has no long-term memories. Neither does Mr. Santaros."

"Okay, but what will we be bringing them together to do?"

"Exactly," Inga says

"I have no idea what will happen," Fortunio admits.



"Exactly," Inga repeats.

"This little science experiment is outside of-" Fortunio starts to say, but Inga interrupts him with a sharp, "-oh. My mistake," then lets the phone crackle.

"What... was your mistake?" Fortunio asks carefully.

"I thought I could help you because I was told that you have been asking around about getting Liquid Karma. I didn't know that you were more focused on Mr. Santaros," Inga says, setting a trap.

"Oh. Yes. Well. Yes. Yes is the answer," Fortunio admits, because he knows that if Inga created the technology most of our communications now ride on, she'll probably know how to intercept transmissions riding across it, and to lie would only make him look like a fool.

"You haven't asked me yet, Mr. Balducci," Inga prods him.

There's a silence on the line as Fortunio seems to be figuring out what the right move is.

"Ask me, Mr. Balducci," Inga demands, with an edge to her voice.

"If I get the impostor UPU2 and Boxer together, can you get my friend-not me, but *my friend*- Liquid Karma?"

"Absolutely," is Inga's clear response.

"This isn't a setup, is it?" Fortunio asks, almost in a whisper.

"Not at all, Mr. Balducci. We will deliver the Liquid Karma to your friend via a soldier in the US Army. Liquid Karma possession is permitted by select soldiers so you will not be involved in the transaction in any way, but rest assured, the transaction will occur. Your name will be cleared and your debt will be cleared, all for a simple playdate being set up."

"Ya got a deal. I'll make it happen tomorrow," Fortunio says, and before Inga can apply more terms, he ends the call, then immediately selects another number from his phone.

We hear the phone ring, then Zora's unmistakably hyper voice shrieks, "Hellooo!"

"I have a favor to ask," Fortunio mumbles into his phone.

"Oh, so you call Mamma Zora when you need to use her connections, but you couldn't book her any work?" Zora asks

"I got you an audition for Dick Pixies 6, but when you showed up, you performed a monologue from Glengarry Glen Ross."

"I played all four people," Zora brags.

"I don't even know what that means," Fortunio sighs.

"I played Glen, Gary, Glen Jr, and Ross," Zora counts out.

Fortunio, furrowing his brow, asks, "Have you ever actually seen the play?"

"It's not a play, it's a movie, dumb-dumb. I read the screenplay. Total mess. The screenwriter forgot to label which Glen was speaking. Really gave me a lot of freedom to work with," Zora responds.

Trying to flee this topic, Fortunio lays out what he needs, "All I want to know is if you've heard anything about Roland Taverner. He could benefit both of us greatly."

"You wanna make some money with Mamma Zora, then?"

"-please stop calling yourself that," Fortunio requests.

"Poppa bear doesn't like that?"

"No."

"So what were you doing at Marxchella? Have a change of heart? Ready to join the revolution?" Zora says, abruptly changing the subject.

"How do you know I was there?" Fortunio asks, looking around the room, but never making eye contact with the camera.

"I always have my sights on you, poppa bear," Zora reveals, and we know that she wasn't behind the rifle, but we begin to question where the footage from the MiniDV camera ended up.

"I was only there to see Jimmy. You know he's my friend," Fortunio tells Zora, and he seems to presume that she found out via the footage.

"Uh-huh," Zora says, leading on Fortunio.

"What?"

"There was buzz at Marxchella that you were with Boxer Santaros," Zora reveals.

"Juicy gossip," Fortunio snarks.

"I heard that Krysta and Boxer have a screenplay. Are they casting?" Zora asks, transitioning into some Hollywood networking seamlessly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Fortunio says.

"I think you do..." Zora responds, "And if we find you're withholding roles from Neo-Marxist actors, we'll cut you up and throw you in the dumpster outside our compound."

It's totally silent on the line, and Fortunio, with so many plates spinning, seems to reach out for some help, as he admits, "Okay, he does have a screenplay. He's starring in it, co-writing it, and directing it. He plays a UPU2 who saves the world. That's why I need Roland."

"Well, I want a role," Zora states, as a demand.

"You can't have a role."

"Why?"

"Because Boxer only does favors for people who do favors for him," Fortunio responds, then gets to what might have been the point of the entire call, "Roland would be the perfect guy for Boxer to do a ride-along with."

"Okay, yup. We'll have him stop by in the cruiser tomorrow," Zora responds, and we watch Fortunio's reaction, which is of concern. Zora turned on a dime regarding this plan- almost like she already knew the plan and didn't need to think it over- almost like Fortunio wasn't the only person Inga pitched the plan to.

"A Frost-aligned Boxer Santaros going missing, only to find that he's making propaganda movies for UPU2?" Zora lays it out, "Of course that looks good for my cause. You give him a video camera and have him film the footage for you. I'll have my guy ask him questions like why he's left his wife, who, not to be catty, either stress eats or is currently preggers."

"Your guy will ask Boxer if he left his pregnant wife and it will all be filmed by Boxer himself, in a UPU2 cruiser?" Fortunio begins to put this all together, and we can't tell if he's doing this for the Liquid Karma connection, the blackmail footage, or both.

"Okay. Hermosa Beach. Tomorrow. Noon," Fortunio says, running this on an accelerated schedule because now that the Neo-Marxists are spreading the rumor of Boxer being seen at their festival, they might weaponize this fact by sending out an allegation that Boxer is moonlighting as a Neo-Marxist. It could be the ultimate story- a Neo-Marxist mole right under Nana Mae Frost's nose. It's so juicy that it writes itself.

"You still have the place in Hermosa Beach?" Zora coos, as though she has fond memories of visiting.

"I will if we get this video, then I'll be able to pay the back rent," Fortunio admits.

"Mamma bear will help poppa bear out," Zora says, and Fortunio hangs up the call.

In a cut that's almost comedic, the feed switches to footage of Zora, with a satellite phone to her ear, as she says, "Hello? Hello. Poppa? Hello?"

Giving up on the call, Zora lowers the satellite phone from her ear, and we're about to turn to Pilot when a UPU2 rushes in from the left side of the

frame and restrains Zora by the neck. The UPU2 has albino-white hair, and he's wearing mirrored wraparound sunglasses. In a throaty deadpan, he hisses into Zora's ear, "Goldilocks better watch out for the big, bad, wolf."

"You could hear that?" Zora asks, with a nervous laugh.

"I heard everything," the UPU2 hisses.

"Goldilocks would never let Poppa Bear taste her oatmeal," Zora says, seeming pleased at this very public act of dominance she's a part of.

What we initially thought was a raid on the compound turns into the gross realization that Zora is literally fucking the police, in the least N.W.A. way possible.

"Are you meeting with DREAM and Dion? Are we going through with Operation: Firework?" the UPU2 asks.

"I sure am!" Zora declares, "And we sure are!"

"I'm ready to fire at any moment," the UPU2 growls in a whisper, then lets Zora go.

Instead of making his way inside the compound, the UPU2 climbs over the balcony, then holds onto the railing and drops down to the street below. We don't judge this bizarre exit because it's not unlike how we will leave this roof tonight.

Zora returns inside the compound and begins clapping her hands together, calling out, "Compound meeting!" She walks over to a button and presses it, then a chime can be heard in the compound.

Dream, Dion, an Asian guy, a frat guy, a black girl, and what might be a homeless person all convene next to a giant toilet that seems to have no purpose beyond serving as a metaphor for the fate of America. The toilet is the Neo-Marxist throne, and the queen bee is about to give her orders.

"Ronald, you can join us in the meeting. You are part of our Neo-Marxist family now," Zora says, talking to him like a child, as though his short-term memory was as much at risk as his long-term memory.

"I think that you need to take me and my brother to a hospital. There's something seriously wrong with us," Ronald says, sitting on a red sofa, his head in his hands.

DREAM walks over to Ronald, and says, "You don't want that, they'll inject you with mercury. You don't want to become autistic, do you?"

"My memory is gone, but even I'm aware that seems like incorrect information," Ronald notes.

"No one will be going to the hospital. It's too much of a risk. You have to complete your mission," Zora says.

Ronald nods at this, then asks, "What exactly is my mission? Have you figured that out yet?"

Zora exchanges a glance with DREAM, then Dion steps up, "Basically, your mission is to just pretend to be your brother, until it's safe for him to go back to being him, then you can go back to being you."

"I am me," Ronald says, almost as though he's trying to will this into reality.

"To me you're you, but to them..." Dion points up to the windows that line the top of the compound, "...you're your brother."

"I want to take my brother back to the UPU2 station with me," Ronald says.

"Hon, you can't. Once you arrive there, Nana Mae Frost will get your iris scans, along with your brother's and because he was leaking information to us, they will kill him," Zora explains, punctuating this information by putting two fingers to her head, then making a gun-blast noise with her mouth and miming brains splattering.

"Nana Mae Frost is right behind you," Ronald says.

Dion, Dream, and Zora all turn around quickly, their paranoia getting the better of them. They face a large TV playing on mute.

"Speaking of the ice queen herself," DREAM says, then walks over and turns up the volume on the TV.

Our feed switches over to what they're watching, as Senator Frost and Nana Mae are seated in a studio for a live TV interview. A female journalist in her early 30's is sitting across from the Frosts at a curved table on a brightly colored newsroom set.

"We'd like to welcome you to our exclusive sit down with the Frost family. We'll be discussing Bobby Frost's Vice Presidential campaign on the Republican ticket, as well as Nana Mae Frost's challenges and vision regarding her position as the deputy director of USIdent."

"Pleasure to be here," Bobby says.

"Thank you for inviting us," Nana Mae says.

"We're glad to have you here," the host says, then glances at her notes "Let's start with how you got here. How would you describe your campaign up to this point, only six months away from possibly moving into the White House?"

Instead of looking at the host who asked the question, Bobby looks into the camera, and says, “Two roads diverged in the woods, and I took the road less traveled, which makes all the difference in how I’ve moved forward. We all make choices, don’t we? I made a choice to take the road of public service that led me here to you- to all of you out there. I’ve been a senator for many years, in the great state of Texas, and I’m well on my way to becoming the next Vice-President of these great United States of America. I couldn’t have done it without my family- my wife Nana Mae, the first female UPU5, as well as my beautiful daughter, Madeline, and her husband, Boxer. With their help, we’ve already done so much, and we’ve just begun. I’m sure you’ve noticed that I have comprehensive reforms outlined that will make the Southland a safer place... a more secure place... a place for American families to thrive without fear of attack. We will never forget Abilene. Ever. But we’re going to die, unless we do something about preventing *another* Abilene. Now let’s get down to action.”

“Thank you, Senator,” the host responds. The director cuts to Nana Mae, and she immediately knows she’s on camera, so with her posture straight and her eye contact with the lens unbroken, she says, “I’ve made it here, to this table, because I was watched carefully by my parents as a child. They actively raised me, and I became a better person due to this care. Now, so often in America, we see children growing up without both parents, and we see tragedy born out of neglect. I’m someone who people paid attention to, and continue to pay attention to, so I vow to return the favor, to ensure that you all receive the gifts that I’ve been given, because I can tell you, I am happy. There are people who watch over me, and care for me, and I have our amazing soldiers who travel the world and ensure that America’s way of life is not placed in jeopardy by terrorists or zealots.”

The host chimes in, “Let’s continue on with that topic. We’ll first look at the overall big picture, then we can get more granular as the conversation progresses. Right now, we have American troops embedded in most of the Middle East, with no pullout date in place, and the draft lottery is growing year-over-year because there appears to be no end to these conflicts. That region, originally valuable to the United States due to their oil production, now has less to offer the American people as companies like Treer Industries provide us with new technologies, so I have to ask, what are your plans to scale back this seemingly endless war?”

Bobby takes the lead, and says, "Well... I think the Middle East needs to behave."

There's a silence in the studio as everyone waits for Bobby to add to this statement, but he doesn't.

Her newscaster voice slipping for a moment, the host asks, "That's your plan? To treat other nations like children?"

"If the child-sized shoe fits..." Bobby muses, then Nana Mae jumps in, "We can no longer risk diplomacy. We thought it couldn't get any worse than Abilene, but we were wrong. It got worse. Quite simply, we can't afford to be wrong anymore."

"We will never forget Abilene and El Paso. The evil men- as well as the evil ideas behind the attacks- must be destroyed," Bobby declares, "With Nana Mae and her wonderful team securing our borders and monitoring high-risk areas, we are safe at home, but there's still much work to be done abroad, and until we feel that the rest of the world can behave themselves, yes, we will be a parental figure to them."

"That is an interesting perspective," the host says, then moves on to the next item on the teleprompter, "There's a rise in Neo-Marxist activity here in the Southland, especially with Prop 69 being such a hot issue--"

"-it's not surprising that a generation raised by helicopter parents have a distrust of black helicopters," Bobby says, chiming in even before a question is asked.

No one laughs, and his point seems to negate what Nana Mae said prior, like they didn't even bother to collaborate on their sound bites.

"The Neo-Marxist threat is something we do take lightly," Nana Mae responds.

"I think you mean that you *don't* take them lightly?" the host seeks clarification.

"If I meant that, I would have said that," Nana Mae responds, then offers a tight smile to the camera.

"They have a groundswell of support," the newscaster points out.

"For now," Nana Mae exhales.

The newscaster grins, because she's backing Nana Mae into a corner, and she asks, "Do you... have a problem with the beliefs of the Neo-Marxists?"

"Yes," Nana Mae says flatly.

"Please, share your concerns," the newscaster purrs.

Nana Mae looks down the barrel of the camera, and explains, "The left has decided to use equality as a recruitment tactic, and it works... in the beginning. They will rail against those who *have*, they will damn those who are the top earners, and they will tell people with an average amount of capital that they're entitled to more, without asking them to contribute more. Capitalism has its warts, but it is a damn good system. The Neo-Marxists know this, so they cling to the critique of inequality, and the critique holds up, if everyone they speak with also believes in the critique. To protect against anyone going outside the bubble, they've leveraged a name calling system. You're racist, you're a bigot, you're a misogynist, you're a soldier for the patriarchy if you dare to challenge their fragile beliefs, so their flawed system stands, by breaching the equality it promises, because there are, inherently, boogiemens built into their system that *don't* deserve the same rights, and you *can* deprive them of that equality because they 'don't deserve it.' However, America is the envy of the world, because it's a capitalist nation, and if the system was ever to be drastically altered, I know a correction would be issued in under a decade, but eight years of a murderous Marxist ideology would take decades to clean up, and that's no good for a country."

"How is capitalism somehow better, with all its inequalities?" the newscaster asks, and Nana Mae smiles, then responds, "*Because of its inequalities.*"

"Inequalities are bad," the newscaster declares, as a blanket statement.

"No," Nana Mae responds.

"No?" the newscaster laughs.

"Inequality is one of the backbones of capitalism, and that is its strength, not a weakness."

"It's exclusionary," the newscaster decides.

"By its very nature..." Nana Mae confirms, "...because if I do something really, really well, I can rise through the ranks, and acquire great power, and great wealth. Who gives me that power? Those who I surpassed along the way. Who gives me that wealth? I earn it. You could say it's too much money- that I'm overpaid- but that's merely an opinion, and the fact is the market dictated my worth. Hell, by their rules, I can even parrot a disprovable wage gap seventy-cents myth to convince you that I deserve *more* money, but I'm a woman with pride, so I'd never do that. If I want more money, I'll work harder. Capitalism's inequality leads to progress. If



there are a hundred people with the same goal that I started with, right off the bat, fifty percent will be too lazy to achieve any mastery, notoriety, or prestige in the avenue of my interest. The field gets smaller, and that's okay, because for the fifty percent that couldn't hack it, they don't just die on the vine, they choose something else, and perhaps in their second choice, they're in the top fifty percent, instead of the bottom, now they're off and running. They can keep climbing. The system allowed them to find a place."

"So many people are being left behind," the newscaster says.

"Speed up or change lanes," Nana Mae responds.

"Some people will find your opinion to be very cold," the newscaster states, with no information to support this beyond her own opinion.

"Ice cream is cold, but people still eat it," Bobby says, sticking up for Nana Mae.

The newscaster suggests, "Maybe people are tired of eating what they're being fed."

"For those people, I highly encourage them to implement Neo-Marxist principles, then they'll know what it's like to starve," Nana Mae responds.

The feed switches back to the compound as Dion, eyebrows raised, remarks, "You gonna fear us, bitch!"

The black girl looks stunned, like her world has just caved in.

The Asian guy is golf clapping.

"Racist, fascist!" DREAM screams, disgusted, "Nana Mae and her crew are killing Neo-Marxist uprisers with complete immunity through the UPU ranks, and they pretend like *we're* the threat?"

"By any means necessary," Dion says, his revolution dial turned to ten, negating DREAM's point.

"Yeah... because you know who's next on her death list?" DREAM yells.

"Sounded like a bunch of people in other countries," the Asian guy says, being practical, "She literally said that we, as Neo-Marxists, have almost no impact on her day-to-day life."

"And provided a compelling argument why the fundamental principles we operate under are inherently flawed," the black girl adds.

"We're gonna have to go deep underground now. No more performing in public," Dion declares, which seems extremely positive for the nation as a whole.

DREAM nods her head in agreement, and says, "We have to sabotage their entire campaign! We have to humiliate her!"

This is a bold move- they'll cease humiliating themselves in order to humiliate others.

"But how do we do it?" Dion asks.

Zora raises her hand, "Pick me! Pick me! I have a solution!"

DREAM points at Zora.

"How about you guys set up the Nowita flophouse for your big performance?" Zora says, brightly positive, but with obvious resentment for her friends.

"You mean begin 'Operation: Love Is Dead?'" Dion asks.

Zora nods her head, and this is the second code name that this operation has been given, so we begin to suspect that Zora's interactions with her UPU2 boyfriend might be mirroring those of Roland Taverner's, just from the opposite side.

"We're going to need to ride with you and Bing if we're going through with Operation: Love Is Dead," DREAM says, then adds, "Dion's shithead dad wanted the Subaru to get new brakes."

"There are no breaks within the revolution! We are one! I told him that!" Dion yells, then calmly adds, "But my dad pointed out there *are* brakes on the Subaru, which I couldn't argue so I brought it to the dealership, then asked them to have a courtesy car drive us back to the compound."

The feed mercifully switches to General Teena MacArthur, who's pacing around the Utopia 3 command center. A soldier behind her focuses on the computer equipment monitoring the Tidal Generator and the energy field they're broadcasting.

In front of Teena is the coffin-looking box that we saw being carried inside Utopia 3. The top of the box is clear, but the camera we're getting this feed from is at such an angle that we can't see inside the box.

Next to Teena, leaning on the box, is a legless, wheelchair-bound man in fatigues. He's losing his gray hair, and his long beard seems like extreme overcompensation for the fleeing follicles atop his head. On the non-transparent portion of the box, the bearded man appears to be playing a game of Dungeons & Dragons.

"Hey, Dungeon Master, do I have your full attention?" Teena asks.

Without looking up from the game, the legless man responds, "Yes, you do, Ms. Teena. What would you like to know?"

"Well, Simon. I have more than a couple questions, the most pressing of which being... what the fuck is going on out there in Lake Mead? We had to shoot a park ranger, then extract stinky monkey corpses from a sand maze that, according to the aerial photos, appeared to be in the shape of the state of Texas."

The Dungeon Master, apparently "Simon," says, "You have all of the information you need, General. We're currently broadcasting a wireless energy field that reaches across the surface of Lake Mead- the largest desert reservoir in the United States. There are 28,500,000 gallons of water in that reservoir, so it's the perfect test site to see if Fluid Karma is destroying our freshwater resources. Recently, during the tests, Lake Mead has been experiencing massive temperature fluctuations. One day it's freezing cold, the next day it's like a jacuzzi. One day, a maze shows up, and well, that seems... cool as fuck."

"You know, for a guy with the last name of "Theory," it seems like you have none of them regarding what's happening," Teena points out.

The man who may be named "Simon Theory" sighs, "I've been looking at the atmospheric diagnostics from the past three months when the Utopia 3 reactor began broadcasting, and you know what I've found?"

"No, but I'm certain you're going to tell me, and the answer won't be quick," Teena predicts.

"I noticed a dense concentration of carbon dioxide, methane, and some other gas that goes unrecognized by our instrumentation."

"Simon Theory, keeper of all military secrets... please let the cat out of the proverbial bag before I roll that wheelchair off the edge of this rig and send you to your watery grave," Teena says, as impatient as Simon is verbose.

"You're so sexy when you're mad," Simon says, then wheels out of frame, only to return with a manila file folder.

Teena takes the folder from Simon, and reads the cover, "Serpentine Dream Theory? Is this another one of your fan-fictions?"

"No, you don't make an appearance anywhere in that file," Simon says, then he winks at Teena.

Vaguely interested in the documents she's been given, Teena hoists herself onto the clear part of the high tech box, next to Simon's board, then starts reading.

We watch for at least two full minutes where absolutely nothing happens on the feed besides Simon playing D&D alone, while Teena reads.

Finally, the silence is broken, as Simon declares, "Man, I envy that guy."

"Who?" Teena asks.

Simon raps his knuckles on the box, and says, "The guy in here."

"The guy in the box is currently extra crispy. How could you envy that?"

"Your ass is directly atop his face," Simon says.

Teena immediately hops off the box, which is, apparently, some sort of high tech coffin that The Whopper has been placed in. The displeased general slams down the file on the glass, and Simon clearly understands he crossed a line, so he says, "Teena, Teena, my dear. I promise that was the last time... for today. Let me make it up to you. You read about that plane in there?"

Teena pauses, a tiny rocket of fear causing her shoulders to tighten, then she quietly responds, "We lost an SUV out there. Did we lose a plane too?"

"Not exactly," Simon says, then goes into full storyteller mode, "It started when air traffic control received a distress signal from United 93. It was all, 'Mayday! Mayday! I... I don't know how to land this plane. My copilot and I are unsure of our location. We don't know where we are or how we even got on this plane!' or some-such shit like that."

"Okay, so this *is* some of your fanfic," Teena says, frustrated. "Let me guess, the only way to control the plane was by one of the guys whipping out his dick, and the copilot ends up using it like a joystick to divine their path."

"Teena, as hot as that sounds, I'm telling you the truth. It's in the report. The folks on the plane, while passing over Lake Mead, heard a loud crack, saw a huge flash of light and whatnot, but everything was fine physically on the plane. However, everyone- the crew, the passengers, the pilot- they all had their memories wiped regarding the events in question. Something in the sky was twisting their melon."

"Where'd they go down?" Teena asks, walking to a screen that has a map of the Nevada/California border.

"We had two F-15s dispatched, and they radioed the instructions to land that puppy onto the tarmac of the Edwards Air Force base," Simon says.

"I should have been given this information sooner. Where are these people? I want to talk to them," Teena says.

"Most of them are probably in their attorney's office right now getting that sweet class action cash- all of them besides Krysta Kapowski."

"Why are you doing that?" Teena asks, staring at Simon.

"Doing what?" Simon asks.

"Your eyebrows keep raising, as though that Krysta name means something to me."

"Krysta Kapowski, aka Krysta Now," Simon says, then smiles a wide grin.

"Should I know this person?"

"Depends upon which websites you log onto after a couple candles are lit in your bedroom," Simon says.

"Okay, I'm just going to continue reading the reports," Teena sighs, grabbing the file.

Returning to his sage-like presence, Simon says, "Suit yourself, but definitely check out the part where Krysta Now talks about how she can see the future."

"She what?" Teena balks.

"Military doctors interviewed all of flight 93's passengers and it was clear that everyone had been stricken with situational amnesia. Everyone... except for the one girl."

"And that girl is Krysta Now?" Teena asks, in disbelief.

"Exactly. Of two things the doctors were certain. One- Krysta Now had gained the ability to see into the future, and two- nobody rocks the cock like Krysta Now."

"So what are we using her for?" Teena asks, no longer bothering to bristle at Simon's crude comments.

"Well, as a fat person who considers himself a genius, I obviously don't believe in God, but the government has assigned a task force to try and penetrate the meaning of the Book of Revelation. Millions have been spent... and now... they've got a solid theory in place due to Krysta's insights."

"I haven't ever seen or heard of these committees."

"They're secret," Simon whispers, as he puts a hand to his face.

"Secret Doomsday Committees?" Teena responds.

"Oh, rock and roll, that sounds so fucking cool. I'm gonna suggest that name at the next meeting," Simon says, hyped.

Before we can get any more information from Simon, the feed switches back to Treer Tower 1. Baron, Inga and the man in the white lab coat are all sitting at a conference table high in the tower.

"You know she's very busy," Baron says to his mother.

Inga's perma-frown gets more severe, then she asks, "And I am... what exactly?"

"Also very busy!" Baron confirms, "That's what I'm saying, you and Serpentine are quite alike!"

"Please don't ever say that again," Inga requests, and Baron goes silent.

Eventually, we hear a door fly open, and Baron gets up from the conference table. He greets his guest, throwing his arms around Serpentine's slim body.

At the edge of the frame, we watch as Serpentine kisses Baron on the lips, then forces her tongue into his mouth.

Inga refuses to react, while we aren't that stoic.

Once Serpentine is no longer in his mouth, Baron leads her to the conference table, then says to her, "I thought you were bringing guests?"

Serpentine lights her Cruella de Vil cigarette, then reminds Barton, "Boxer Santaros cannot be seen in public. Da Frost dynasty is watching."

Inga shows a small amount of approval at this, because it protects their interests to keep Boxer isolated.

Almost too fast, without giving us enough time in the meeting at Treer Tower, the feed again clicks over, this time to Fortunio, in the living room of the beach house, and he's sitting next to Boxer, who's reading the screenplay to *The Power*, practicing delivery of all his stupid lines.

Boxer-as-Jericho comments on a snake burping a fart, and Fortunio, desperate, requests, "Please, have mercy on me, and put the script down."

"I need you to run lines with me," Boxer says.

Fortunio shakes his head back and forth, shutting down this idea.

"I know I've been asking a lot of you, but you're an executive producer. This is what they do."

"Executive Producers don't run lines with the actors," Fortunio states.

"What do they do then?" Boxer asks.

Fortunio shrugs, then says, "No one really knows."

"Do they give advice?" the lost actor asks.

"Sure," Fortunio responds, his plan falling into motion.

"Okay, then give me some."

"Once your hairline gets a little further back, just shave it all off,"

Fortunio says.

Boxer puts a hand on the top of his head, seeming a little hurt, then gets more specific, "No, I need help in becoming Jericho Cane. The man on this page is singular in his focus, and brave, meanwhile I'm afraid for a significant portion of my waking hours. I'm afraid of what's going on in my head, I'm afraid that I won't remember my lines on the first day of shooting, and I'm afraid that no one will believe I'm a UPU2. Most importantly, I'm afraid that my dick isn't even in the top 50% of dick-lengths Krysta has fucked."

Fortunio puts his hand on Boxer's broad shoulder, and Boxer winces because his tattoos are still sore.

"Alright, I'm gonna hook you up," Fortunio says, then lowers his voice, "I know Krysta might think this is too dangerous, but my friend, Zora, knows this UPU2 officer, and she could probably make a ride along happen tomorrow."

"I don't want to lie to Krysta," Boxer admits.

"Okay, then we'll just have to make her think it was her idea. Trust me, buddy, this ride along will open this whole shit up. It will allow you to immerse yourself in your role- something all great actors do. You'll go with the UPU2 officer, and you'd ride along with him in his squad car. We can borrow one of the cameras that Krysta films location segments for her talk show with, and you can videotape the UPU2's behavior so you can bring authenticity to Jericho Cane."

"Is that why Krysta videotapes every time we fuck? So she can watch the video of it, then use that as inspiration for her films?"

"No, she does that because she thinks she rocks the cock the best in front of the camera," Fortunio says.

Boxer states for the record, "Camera or not, nobody rocks the cock like Krysta Now."

"Right, but I think you need a camera to capture this ride-along, just like Krysta captures footage of her riding your dick. I think you need to shadow this officer," Fortunio states.

“Wait a damn minute! I don't need to fuck him, do I?” Boxer asks, slowly raising his hands.

“What? No. Come on, man. Pay attention. In fact, as your producer, I'm telling you to go on this ride-along. And don't fuck the officer. This is real-life, not a song from 'Straight Outta Compton.'”

“I'm going to patrol the streets in a UPU2 cruiser!” Boxer states, his action hero inflection returning.

Fortunio pats Boxer on the shoulder, and Boxer winces. Fortunio realizes that he hit Boxer's tattoos, so he pats him on the head gently as an apology. “Alright, buddy, I'm gonna set this up, okay?” Fortunio asks, getting up, and making his way around the sofa.

Boxer nods, and Fortunio steps out of frame. The feed flicks from camera to camera until we're back in Fortunio's room, where he takes out his cell phone, and makes a call.

We expect Zora to pick up, but instead, we hear DREAM'S voice screech an angry, “Hello?”

“Could I speak with Zora?” Fortunio asks.

“What's the password?”

“This is Fortunio.”

“That's not the password,” DREAM says.

“DREAM, I support the arts, please,” Fortunio says, gripping his cell with anger.

“We won't need your support. We aren't performing on stage anymore,” DREAM announces.

“The nation weeps,” Fortunio responds, the statement dripping with sarcasm.

“We're actually in on your Zora plan,” DREAM reveals.

“What's my Zora plan?” Fortunio asks, almost skeptically.

“You know. You're calling about it.”

“I'm calling to get the ride-along set up.”

“Because...” DREAM leads him on.

“Because nothing,” Fortunio says, getting frustrated.

“Because you want footage of Boxer to sell,” DREAM presumes Fortunio's intentions.

“Can I just-”

“-Dion and I are going to make you rich,” DREAM declares with a sinister glee.



Almost as though he's been reminded he's dealing with a complete moron, Fortunio asks, "Don't you want to... I don't know... make yourselves rich first?"

With false modesty in her voice, DREAM says, "The revolution is payment enough."

"I suppose that upheaval is the ultimate credit card."

"Whatever, just deliver Boxer and we'll do the rest," DREAM spits.

"The rest being..."

"The rest being that you get the most in-demand video of all time. Boxer will come upon a staged domestic dispute at the flophouse on Nowita. Zora will call it in as a noise complaint, Boxer follows our UPU2 officer with his video camera and the UPU2 will have to pretend to shoot us," DREAM explains with an anarchist's pleasure.

"What the fuck? I didn't agree to this," Fortunio barks into the phone.

"You agreed to make a trade-off," DREAM says.

"I don't want anyone to get shot," Fortunio states.

"It'll be all blanks and squibs, just like in the movies. Dion and I are going to stage our own deaths and then disappear underground."

"You subsist off attention. This won't work," Fortunio attempts to dissuade her.

"We're weaning ourselves off attention, and expanding our mind with Liquid Karma. If we don't do this, we're in danger. This is the most important election in the history of the country. Nothing will stop the Eliot/Frost campaign... except the assassination of two Santa Monica Pier Beach cultural icons."

"Who are you going to assassinate?" Fortunio asks, genuinely.

"Dion and I are the victims! Are you paying attention?" DREAM shrieks.

"I was following you perfectly. The murder of Dion and Dream, committed by a racist cop, caught on tape by a movie star with political ties," Fortunio recounts without excitement or enthusiasm.

"Ties to the corrupt Senator Bobby Frost from Texas and the fascist queen of USIDent, Nana Mae Frost," DREAM says, fantasizing about the *New York Times* article.

"Full disclosure, this is insane to the point that I won't stand in your way because I'm afraid I'll be next," Fortunio declares.

"We live in an insane world, Forty."

"Don't call me Forty."

"Sometimes the only way to confront insanity is to give it a dose of its own medicine," DREAM muses.

"I think you could OD someone with the amount of crazy you're filled with," Fortunio says.

With confidence, DREAM responds, "That's the plan."

Then the screen goes black, and the electronic blip releases us from the grip of the laptop.

We look to Pilot, he looks to the rift- or maybe he's looking to the sun.

*"Dinner time?"*

We're hungry, but again, we feel as though we lost time. We were sure that we would stop for lunch, then we simply didn't.

*"I won't shoot you if you go on a food run."*

"What are you hungry for?" we ask him.

*"You don't have to buy me dinner. I'll grab something from the Mariasol while you're getting food."*

"Don't worry about it, this hasn't exactly been the most expensive vacation," we point out, standing up, stretching our legs.

*"Getting me a thank you gift for wasting your PTO?"*

"Not at all," we say, finally looking over at him, "Plus what good is a savings account when the world won't exist in a couple days?"

Pilot drums his fingers on the laptop, then he pops it off the turret.

*"Come on, I know a place where we can eat dinner in peace. We'll grab some food, then get out of the sun."*

Even before we agree to the plan, Pilot lifts up his seat on the turret and inside we see a stack of boxes that contain 50 cal bullets. He grabs one of the boxes then slams the "secret compartment" shut.

With both the box, and the laptop under his arm, Pilot walks to the edge of the roof. We follow him, despite the fact that we fear the reason why he needs bullets for a casual dinner.

We climb down from the roof, then cut through the Mariasol, and while Pilot still has to shake hands and accept thanks, each conversation is much shorter than usual, likely because of the box of bullets he's not exactly hiding.

When we reach the boardwalk, Pilot signs a couple autographs, but he's able to keep moving, and the instability that the Tidal Generator is causing

doesn't lead to any significant altercations. Again, the bullets probably expedite matters.

Two girls cat-call Pilot, and he turns, walking backward, and he blows them a kiss. The girls fall over each other to catch this kiss that they seem to believe has traveled through the air like it was Fluid Karma.

"Still got it," we say.

*"It was nicer when I was famous for bad TV. Those girls are my bad TV fans."*

"As opposed to?"

*"As opposed to being famous for murdering Iraqis."*

We put our head down.

*"I guess I owe you the truth about that period in my life."*

"You don't owe us anything," we assure him.

It seems Pilot is alright with ending this conversation and instead of finding us that place in the shade, he chooses the same burger joint where we got him the take out before, and it makes us feel happy that our choice was good enough for a repeat visit.

We order our burgers, and Pilot reaches for his wallet, but the cashier says, "Register's broken."

We stare at him, then the burgers appear, along with a six-pack of Budweiser still on the plastic rings.

"How much do we owe you?" Pilot asks.

The surfer pushes the food toward us, then says, "I told you the register is broken. Enjoy your dinner, private Abilene."

Pilot salutes the boy at the register. The boy salutes him back.

We take our meals and search for somewhere to sit, but this moment at the register sticks with us. We feel deeply affected by the kid- no more than 19- paying such a direct respect to Pilot. The fact that they saluted each other sent a chill up our spine. There's a buzzing question of, *Did this child go to Iraq or Afghanistan, and he's back from his tour?* This is the horror of the mandatory draft. Our nation's children have become men, and that's easy to forget when we've been sitting in front of a screen that constantly shows us grown Neo-Marxists acting like petulant babies.

Instead of stopping to eat in the numerous perfectly fine dining areas we pass, it isn't until we reach an ice cream truck with a massive fiberglass cone bolted on a horizontal tilt that Pilot makes a move. He knocks a knuckle on the back door of the truck in a familiar pattern.

We hear someone moving around, popping deadbolts, and we try to identify the rhythm of the knock. Finally, in the back of our brain, we hear Brandon Flowers crooning, *"I've got soul, but I'm not a soldier."* That was the beat Pilot did with his knock.

The back door of the ice cream truck swings open, revealing a man in an army jacket, with a tie-dyed shirt on underneath it. We're more than a little troubled to find that, inside the truck, instead of being lined with freezers, the walls are lined with weapons.

*"Walter! Mind if we chill out in here?"*

"You're hilarious, Pilot," Walter says, not laughing, not amused, then walks back toward the front of the ice cream truck, leaving the door open. "I hope your tail is cool," we hear him say.

*"Our tail is Fonzie."*

This acknowledgment of our existence, and confirmation of our relative coolness, seems to be enough for Walter, who disappears behind a translucent plastic curtain that separates the artillery from the driver's seat. Careful not to lose our burger in the process, we climb inside the truck after Pilot.

Turning back, Pilot slams the door, then locks three different locks.

Once again, *youth replaced by war* is a theme that grabs us.

Sticking his head through a gap in the translucent curtain, Walter asks, "How goes it on the beach?"

*"Alright. I mean, except for the fact that the time rift is slowly destabilizing human behavior to the point that it's rapidly approaching being worthy of a 50 cal. Oh, speaking of..."*

Pilot hefts the box of shells, then slides it across the truck floor, toward Walter.

"You beautiful bastard," Walter says, entering the artillery-area of the truck, then admiring the gift. He immediately goes to work, filing the box away in a well-organized shelf of bullets.

*"Compliments of the US government."*

"I went to war and all I got were these stupid bullets," Walter jokes.

*"Be glad you got them in the box and not in the gut."*

"Amen to that," Walter says, then leans toward Pilot who holds up the sixer. Walter slips a can out of the rings, then opens it. The serpentine hiss of this action entices us to follow suit.

The three of us press our cans together, and when no one comes up with a salute, we say, "To the future." This does the trick and we all knock back our drinks in an agreed celebration of a time that's in jeopardy.

We sit on the floor of the truck with Pilot, and feel safe.

*"So, do you want the story or what?"*

"The story?" we ask, not following.

Pilot lifts his Budweiser, then taps its rim against his scar.

"You gonna open up your laptop and put on the 60 Minutes special?" we ask.

Pilot shakes his head no, then takes a bite of his burger.

"Did they get it right?" we ask, deeply curious.

*"They got it right, but didn't tell it right."*

"What did they get wrong?" we ask, awkwardly.

"Ah, this is why you decided to visit," Walter says, then gets up and goes behind the plastic translucent curtain, leaving us somewhat alone.

The fact that Walter, despite being a vet, didn't stay for this war story, tells us that this is going to be a rough go.

Pilot gulps down some Budweiser, then seems ready to start the story.

*"It was scary... but it was... destiny. Which is also scary."*

"Destiny?" we ask, wondering how a devastating wound could be necessary in any way.

*"Think about it, I was born in Abilene, as the son of an Air Force fighter pilot."*

"So you were born to protect the US?"

*"I think we all were. Me, you, Walter."*

"You were born in Abilene, but you left," we point out.

*"I went with my mom to LA. I had always wanted to act, and I felt a pull. That was me climbing onto the roof, then looking down the barrel."*

"How many auditions did it take for you to book the role on *Tristan's Landing*?"

*"One."*

"It's like it was meant to be," we say.

*"I starred in a mega-popular TV show, then Abilene blew up, and... I lost most of my family."*

We avert our eyes, and say, "That's such a jarring transition."

*"I always wonder..."*

Pilot doesn't need to finish this statement, and we ask, "Did you join the military for revenge, or-"

*"I was drafted. The other story is just... a smokescreen. They always planned to use me for propaganda. From poster boy, to poster boy. So it goes. Who says you can't teach a new dog old tricks?"*

"Why did you go?"

*"I'm confused at what part of the draft you think is optional."*

"You were a celebrity choice though. Like Elvis."

*"Elvis had it easy; they sent me to Baghdad."*

"Even if you didn't have a choice, it's brave that you went," we say, because it feels important to acknowledge.

*"When I got there, no one felt that way. Everyone in my unit assumed I was pampered. They called me 'Pretty boy.' They were under the impression that I was getting special treatment, even when they could see that I wasn't, because I was right by their side, always."*

"So it was hard for you to fit in?"

*"Sure."*

Pilot closes both his untouched and his injured eye:

*"But then I started killing people."*

"Ah, shit. You probably don't want to talk about-"

*"-it's not all bad."*

Pilot winks his scarred eye at us.

*"I also met my best friend in Baghdad."*

"He was in your unit?"

*"He was in my unit, and we became friends because of our mutual love of Dick."*

We try not to react, but fear we end up looking insane in the process.

*"As in Philip K..."*

We remain frozen, and carefully ask, "Philip K... was also in your unit?"

Pilot laughs.

*"Philip K. Dick. The novelist."*

"Right, of course," we say, still confused, but less confused.

*"He wrote The Man In The High Castle."*

We nod at this.

*"You know, that book about an alternate history where Hitler and the Axis powers won World War II?"*

We nod at this.

*"They also used his work for Blade Runner."*

"Oh. Rock 'n roll. That movie is great," we say.

*"Which version?"*

We go through the cuts we've seen, then decide, "Maybe... the third cut... that one seems solid."

*"I had a VHS directors cut I enjoyed."*

"Do you think they'll ever stop with the cuts? I mean, at what point do you decide when something like that is done?"

*"I don't think something like that is done, I think it's just set aside until the story becomes pertinent again, and another cash grab happens."*

"So your friend. He... is still around?" we ask, carefully, because we feel we need to know this information as it will form how we handle and joke with Pilot in the future.

*"Yeah, he's still around."*

"Do you see each other often?"

*"No, uh, not really- no- well, not in person."*

This stumble from Pilot is the first time that his careful drawl has come off as unsteady. For once, the next word wasn't already locked and loaded.

*"If you stay on that turret with me until the end, three days from now, I'll let you sell this story."*

"No one is selling anything," we assure him.

*"In LA, everyone is selling everything so there's no shame in it."*

"Maybe there should be," we suggest.

*"In four days, you can sell my story. Those are the terms."*

Four days. Everything clicks and we finally understand what Pilot is getting at. The world is ending in three days so it won't matter if Pilot lets us sell the story in four days- who will be left to sell it to?

Pilot touches his cheek with a greasy hand.

*"Is it weird... that when it happened, part of me said, 'Finally, that face is gone, and I can figure out what people really think of me.'"*

"That's not weird."

*"Is it weird I still don't know how people really feel about me?"*

"You're revered by people here."

*"They've been programmed to like me."*

"People like you because any soldier who gets drafted and doesn't try to get out of his duty is brave."

*"I thought differently when I was in that bird's nest tower overseeing shit."*

"That's where it happened?"

*"That's where it started, where it began snowballing into what happened..."*

Pilot grabs another beer off the rings.

*"I was up in that nest with my best friend. We were waiting for a massive supply drop from a prototype mega-zeppelin, when we saw this van pull up to the building we're stationed across from. This wasn't one of our vans. When we saw the Iraqis step out of the van, we radioed in. One of the Iraqis was too thick- the guy's midsection had to have been wired to detonate- so over the radio, our commander gave my best friend permission to shoot. He raised his weapon, and tracked the Iraqi who was approaching the building, but he didn't pull the trigger. I knew we were gonna lose the target any second, and I saw his hand trembling, so I aimed and shot. Target eliminated. My friend just couldn't do it. He didn't have it in him. But I had it in me, because that ended up being the fifth Iraqi I had killed, and each time I got better at it- in all ways."*

"And they reported that news back to us, and we celebrated," we say, remembering this day because it was a day when our pop culture passion and our closeted nationalistic passion met in the middle.

*"I got better press for shooting Iraqis than I ever did shooting a TV show."*

"It shouldn't have to be that way."

*"It's how it was though. I had no problem with being the one that had to take the shot... but then there was my friend that I had to worry about. I knew that he was... a*



*little shaky, and I knew that there were options to calm him down, but I think I was scared to bring it up to him, and he wasn't comfortable enough to bring it up to me. I probably should have said something, before I took that shot. Before I took my first life, everyone treated me like I was scared and helpless, but I wasn't, so I didn't want to do that to my friend. I left it at that, ya know? Sleeping dogs. So the next week, we were called into a mission in Fallujah. We got choppered in, and at first it looked like we showed up at a school, but they briefed us that it had been converted into the headquarters of an insurgency group, and there were rumors that Abu Muhmahed Alweed was there. I guess they use schools because it kept the US from blowing up the building outright. That's why we were there- to see what was what. And as we were still in the sky- as we were in that chopper- I looked across at my friend, and told him, 'It's going to be okay. You're going to be okay.' And, uh, and, so, he, uh, looked dead in my eyes, and he said to me... he said... 'If I die...' uh. Shit. Let me start over, he goes, 'If I die, I just hope that I'm with you when it happens. I don't want to be all alone,' and uh, he said- he said- 'I don't want to be someone's hostage.' He was scared- just really scared. And I didn't want to give him- ya know- my Liquid Karma- so I handed him my iPod, right? I gave it to him and I put on a song."*

"Which song?"

Walter, from the front seat, sings, "I got soul, but I'm not a soldier." Pilot points in the air to indicate that's the song.

*"He listened to the song, then when it was over, he tried to give me the iPod back, but I didn't let him. I told him to keep it. He had it on him when we touched down behind a large truck parked in front of the entrance to the school, and our commanding officer pulled out a map- like one of those fire evacuation charts. He pointed down at the entrances and telegraphed how we would be sweeping the place. Then we waited, and waited, and waited, and*

*no one came out of this fuckin' school, right? We showed up in a chopper- they knew we were there- but no one came out to check why. If a chopper lands on your front lawn, generally you're going to go out and take a look, especially if your yard happens to be a war zone. But there was nothing. Just.. near-silence. Now, this didn't change the fact that we had a job to do, and it was a job we were hastily trained to do, so we had to do it. And we did do it. My team entered the school, and we maneuvered our way down the north corridor, while my best friend's team headed around the back. I was in the middle of my team, clearing room after room, getting the Iraqis out of there. We didn't see any weapons- no one was givin' us trouble, then suddenly this blast from further down the hall rocked the building, and the hallway I was in started filling up with dust and debris. I had listened carefully on the chopper- I knew that it wasn't our team that set off the blast, which meant it was the guys trying to protect Abu. I ducked into a cleared classroom, to step out of the worst of the blast-dust, because the visibility was shit. I stayed in the room, and I had my sight on that door, and I was watchin' it, then... in runs my best friend, and I called out to him- not his name, but sort of in this primal grunt- maybe a noise of fear because I thought he was hurt, maybe a noise of relief that he was alive. I saw that guy I knew in the bird's nest, and I had been conditioned to help him when he would get into that wide-eyed panic mode, but the primal noise I made, combined with him running on his primal instincts, and the fact he was so afraid... I think he thought the grunt was whatever fuckin' language those Iraqis spoke, and, uh... and, uh... I watched him pull the trigger."*

We see the tears in Pilot's eyes, and we say, "Pilot, you're..."

*"I'm alive. I'm fine. This is what happened. This... is what happened."*

"You're alive," we confirm.

*"It was the damnedest thing. I knew I was shot in the head, but I was alive, and my friend went from shooting me, to holding me."*

Pilot pauses, to collect himself.

*"...my best friend. It was friendly fire, by my best friend. And that was the last time we saw each other in person. I was outta there after that. The plastic surgeon awaited, the press tour awaited."*

We don't say anything for a very long time. There's too much to say, and we can't locate the appropriate reaction to what Pilot had to endure.

We eventually complete a sentence, choosing to say, "That's a tough thing to forgive."

*"I forgive him, in the same way that you forgave me after I made you watch footage of the worst day of your life. After that fuck up, I knew that I was going to have to tell you about the worst day of my life. I had to tell you because there won't be footage of it on the laptop screen."*

"Why?"

*"Because the government doesn't have us record what we do out there."*

"Why?"

*"Because they don't want anyone to see what they're doing."*

"But they watch everything we do- the cameras are omnipresent."

*"And they turn them off once we're no longer on US soil."*

At this moment, Pilot's laptop turns back on with an electric pop, and he looks genuinely scared. He checks the screen, then stands up.

"Everything okay?" we ask.

Pilot looks toward the translucent curtain.

*"Thanks for the hospitality."*

"Your a good kid, Pilot," Walter responds.

Pilot nods at this, even though he knows Walter can't see it, then he turns and starts popping the deadbolts on the back door of the truck.

We bid a weak farewell to the man behind the translucent curtain, but he doesn't respond, and we have a feeling that he's still back in that moment that Pilot vividly conjured. An idea shocks us in its likelihood- Walter was in on that raid as well. This changes how we view him, and how

we view his relationship with Pilot. Maybe he's too old, or maybe he was the one who led the mission.

We leave the ice cream truck, with no beer buzz, and after Pilot signs a series of autographs and takes a couple pictures- his eyes bloodshot, his smile a mask- we return to the turret, and the screen is already playing footage from the living room of Fortunio's house in Hermosa Beach. Based on the eye contact with the lens, we know Krysta is watching TV, but we can't see what she's watching because the camera in the TV is capturing the footage. Boxer comes into the room, then he raises an eyebrow, asking, "What's on?"

"I'm watching a Tivo'd episode of this show called The View," Krysta responds.

"It looks like shit," Boxer says, squinting at the TV.

"It totally is," Krysta assures him, "And honestly it's such a relief because my show is me and the Now Girls- my porno friends- and we talk about normal girl things like who we think is going to win The Bachelor, and what we think the bachelor's cum tastes like. These old hags never even mention cum-taste-pallets. It's like they live in a spunk-free world."

"Would you want them to talk about tasting loads?" Boxer asks.

"I'd want them to *want to* talk about cum," Krysta says, then quietly punctuates her statement with, "Women's empowerment," almost as a non sequitur.

Boxer nods at this, then appears to look past the TV, out the window, and he says, "I'm going to go take a walk on the beach, just to clear my head. I have a big day tomorrow. Fortunio scheduled me for a ride-along."

"He did?" Krysta asks, concern coloring her voice.

"Yeah. He didn't mention it to you? We need your camera so I can shoot some real-life UPU2 scenes, and we can do some Jericho Cane rewrites to make him more authentic."

Krysta seems to ponder this, then says, "If you want to do a ride-along, I won't stop you."

"And I can take a walk?" Boxer asks, again reduced to a child.

Krysta nods, and says, "I have to meet up with the girls anyway, so you can walk me to the bar."

Boxer leans over and kisses Krysta, but before the moment ends with them spending the night in bed, Krysta pulls away, stands up, then asks, "Mr. Cane, will you escort me to O'Brien's?"

"It would be my pleasure, Ms. Fox," Boxer says.

"*Doctor Fox!*" Krysta corrects him, then scoots over in her heels to check her wig in what must be a mirror on the wall next to the TV.

Boxer puts on his hoodie; Krysta touches up her makeup. Once they're both wearing the masks which allow them to face the world, we watch as Boxer and Krysta leave the house in Hermosa Beach.

The feed switches to a security camera on the street, and we have to listen closely for audio. If the simple surveillance cameras on the street are picking up conversations, then the only way to avoid being listened to in this country is to strip and dash into the woods, as though we're returning to Eden. We know that some of the other general-location security cameras didn't have audio on them, but the more we think about it, the more we realize just how easy it is to mute audio.

Krysta's question, "Do you think we need to steal baby Caleb from Tawna?" is hollow-sounding, but audible on the feed.

We can't see Boxer's face because of the hood, and the audio is even worse when he speaks, but we think he says, "That would set some shit into motion, wouldn't it?"

"It would."

"Are we ready for that shit?" might be Boxer's question.

"We aren't," Krysta seems to respond, but most of our interpretation is from her body language.

"I guess we shouldn't do any baby-stealing until we're ready to care for a stolen baby," sounds like the conclusion that Boxer draws.

We continue to watch them on the feed as they walk together, and no one seems to notice Boxer, because he's standing next to Krysta, who's an attention vortex.

As they near the front of O'Brien's, Krysta asks Boxer, "Will you please be careful tonight, and immediately return to the house once your mind is clear, so nothing happens to you?"

Boxer nods his hooded head, then gives Krysta a kiss.

We're unsure how Krysta could let Boxer just wander the beach, but when the feed stays focused on Krysta, instead of following Boxer, we realize that Krysta is giving Boxer this freedom because she loves him, and you don't treat a person you love like a prisoner. What initially seemed like a dumb move on Krysta's part now mutates into a credit toward the legitimacy of their connection.

We make a noise of displeasure as we watch from the O'Brien's security camera as Zora does "stand up comedy." She's on a stage that's raised only a single stair higher than the audience, and she's screaming out a routine that has such subject topics as, "Fluid Karma is inferior to my renewable energy resource idea of tossing Republican bodies into a giant incinerator," and, "Those assholes have a mega-zeppelin. What could go wrong there? Were they all out of Titanics for Baron to manufacture?" and, "Bobby Frost's entire hometown was wiped off the map, and when asked for comment they said, this is the second worst thing to happen to Abilene... get it, the first is the birth of Bobby Frost. His birth is worse than the nuclear apocalypse," then she also has a bit about female razors that is kind of self-aware because of the rant, "Can my pussy tell the difference in razors? Is my pussy like, 'That has a metal handle- that's a dick razor- don't mis-razor me!'" All of this is screamed, Sam Kinison style. The sparse-but-rowdy audience of Neo-Marxists seems to be eating it up, as Zora puts the microphone to her crotch and begins to make beat-box queefing sounds with her mouth... or at least we hope that she's using her mouth to make these noises.

The group of pornstars sitting in the back of O'Brien's is *not* eating this up. They get their pussies Brazilian waxed so they don't even follow the premise of the material, and they understand that queefing is a normal part of sex, and not particularly funny.

Shamefully, we know the names of everyone at the pornstar table, and we're tempted to start telling Pilot about each girl, as we've finally reached a topic we're an expert in.

Krysta sits down at the table of beautiful women, and enduring Zora is worth being able to ogle these stunners. To Krysta's right is Shoshana Cox, who has really bad highlights, and we once saw fuck a girl's butt with a peeled banana, then she ate it (both the girl's butt and the banana).

Next to Shoshana is Sheena Gee who looks like Krysta when she's not wearing her wig, and we once saw her help a guy give her a "Rinse and Repeat," which is like a facial, but on the back of her head, so we know she's double jointed.

Rounding out the table is Deena Storm, who looks so "New Jersey" that if she got Boxer Santaros-style amnesia, the first thing they'd do when they found her in the desert is put her on a train back to Bergen County- which would probably be a much better ride for her than the trains she's used to.

It's hard to hear what's going on at the table, but it's easy to pay total attention to these girls.

"Isn't it insane that Zora wants to do sound for our show, but she's so fucking loud, to a fault?" Shoshana asks, staring at Zora in disbelief.

"People accept it, because of the rumors about her... I've heard from reliable sources that she once bandsawed a guy's head off," Krysta notes casually.

"That was my greatest fear in high school," Shoshana reveals.

"I think this screaming is like camouflage for a lack of talent," Sheena decides aloud.

"Oh, like when a girl decides to do a nothing-but-butt scene because she can't deepthroat?" Sheena asks sincerely.

"It takes talent to take it in the butt," Shoshana responds, offended.

"It won't take talent once my new energy drink formula comes out," Krysta declares, becoming a saleswoman, teasing, "We're going to take market share from Acid Fuel."

"How?" the entire table of pornstars ask, looking for butt-burn salvation.

"My energy drink also doubles as lube," Krysta says.

The girls all laugh out loud, then toast champagne flutes to this.

Zora looks at them wistfully, then tells the audience, "See. They love it. They fucking love my jokes!"

"Okay, serious time," Krysta says, and all the porn princesses look to their queen. "I want you to know that I've landed a very big gig, and I'll need you girls to back me up."

"Ohh, is orgy season upon us?" Shoshana asks, seemingly up for it.

While drumming on the table to get some anticipation built up, Krysta says, "Baron von Westphalen has invited us to dance during the 4th of July launch of his new mega-zeppelin!"

"Isn't he gay though? His clothes are reflective enough that you could use them as a makeup mirror," Sheena points out.

"No. He's not gay. He would have a *much* better fashion sense if he was," Krysta points out, then tries to keep the energy up, by saying, "Girls, this is big. Rebekah Del Rio is singing the national anthem the same night."

"You mean Vanessa?" Shoshana asks.

"Who cares, the question is, are you in?" Krysta asks.

Before the girls can answer, the feed switches to Nana Mae Frost, as she paces around what appears to be a pure-white luxury penthouse. We aren't sure if the penthouse is in Treer Tower 1, but the view is high above LA.

Nana Mae's pacing takes her into the living room, where the feed clicks over to show us Bobby, Vaughn, and Madeline- who are all holding drinks. The three of them look like they could be in a scotch ad- they're that posed, as they watch a newscast in mid-report, which we can hear, but can't see, "...the Clinton/Lieberman campaign has a mere two-point lead in the latest California poll for the Democrats, while the Eliot/Frost campaign is ahead by a single point barreling toward the Republican primary. In other news, Boxer Santaros- Hollywood leading man and husband to Madeline Frost-Santaros- was mysteriously absent from his wife's side during yesterday's fund-raiser for disabled Veterans. This raises the question... does Boxer Santaros hate our troops and support terrorism?"

Vaughn snorts at this comment, then says, "Fucking CNN," then Nana Mae chimes in, "Fucking actors. Never trust an actor! They are the most unreliable people on the planet!" She glares at Madeline, and hisses, "You should have never let that paranoid schizophrenic maniac into this family. This will ruin us!"

Bobby knocks back a finger of scotch, then sets out to defend his daughter, warning Nana Mae, "Now, don't you blame her. You knew that the marriage contract would raise our profile. Hell... who knows if you would have gotten the USIDent appointment without all the publicity he brought to the table. Americans love him. He could probably beat my poll numbers in this fucked up state."

"Boxer Santaros is a good man, and if he's gotten himself into trouble... I bet it's not his fault. Don't jump to conclusions," Vaughn says, trying to mediate. "Tomorrow morning, we'll have every surveillance resource in this city at your disposal, Madeline. Boxer Santaros cannot elude the watchful eye of US-IDENT."

"He has so far," Madeline points out, and when she does, she glares at her mother to underscore who she holds responsible for this failure.

"We just have too much data- it's an overload. I mean, I've had Starla and some of the other raincoats on LAX toilet duty for 24 hours straight at this point," Nana Mae rants.



"Hire more people," Bobby says, "Job creation. We got a bulk deal on those clear raincoats you make them wear. Got a whole warehouse full of them in Chatsworth. I can make a visit there, if need be."

Vaughn immediately starts repeating, "No, no, no," likely to keep Bobby from saying this at a rally, then he points out, "There are... barriers... to..."

"What Vaughn is tiptoeing around is the fact that I screen these people. I do a full review, for a month, before I bring them in. I want to make sure that they don't have access to my system unless I can trust them."

"Because what you're doing is so creep-"

"-enough Madeline. If you're going to sit at the grownups table, you have to act like one yourself," Nana Mae scolds her daughter.

"Oh no! Please don't kick me out of your frozen palace, ice queen," Madeline snarks, sounding like she might be a Neo-Marxist double agent herself.

"Congrats, you watch the news, Madeline," Nana Mae responds, and apparently "ice queen" is a term of endearment for Nana Mae that the media is running with.

"There are worse nicknames," Vaughn says, trying to help.

"Yes. Like the one we call you behind your back," Nana Mae spits at him.

The feed switches to Utopia 3 and we remain in the dark as to Vaughn's nickname.

The high-tech box is still sitting in the middle of Teena's command center, and Simon Theory is still using it as a table so he can play Dungeons & Dragons against, seemingly, zero other people.

Teena reaches the end of the "Serpentine Dream" file, then tosses it on the clear section of the box. "So the analysis of all the data concludes that there's a Primer?" Teena asks, revealing where her focus will be, on a go-forward basis.

Simon nods, then says, "A Primer that will serve as a catalyst for the final acts."

"There's another option as well, Simon."

"Right, yeah, okay, maybe the Primer has arrived on the path to end all suffering and it could be sent to help us extinguish this big mess of a planet once and for all, but that's a big bad reality too much to comprehend even for an emo dude such as myself who's like, 'Fuck! Why did you take my legs! I was already fat! Now I'm definitely not going to be able to lose this

gut! Southwest will ban me from flying for being this fat, and the US government is going to have to fund another mega-zeppelin just to carry my ass around.”

Teena rolls her eyes, and remains on topic, “So what form does this Primer take? A burning bush? A mystical unicorn of some sort?”

“You saw the letters we arrived at. It was in the file,” Simon says, and the disappointment on Teena’s face is obvious, but she still asks, “What do you think the letters mean?”

“Let’s see, I wrote them on the back of the packaging slip for my Bullywug Guard,” Simon responds, searching the pockets in his fatigues until he finds the scrap of paper. “Ah. Here it is. The letters are, ‘E A T R M A U R V E I N F K.’”

Unimpressed, Teena asks, “So now, what, we ask Vanna to-”

“-we have no idea what the letters mean, but you saw my anagram formula in the file,” Simon interrupts her.

“Would you be at all displeased if I merely skimmed some portions of your file, Dungeon Master?”

“We got two options, Teena, my dream-a. We got FREAK MANVIRTUE... and MARTIN KEFAUVER.”

“Well if only we had a system where we could put a person’s name in it and we could see what they’re doing at this particular moment,” Teena responds.

“I already have someone doing that,” Simon assures her.

“What have they seen?” Teena asks.

“Dude jerks it. A lot. If homeboy ain’t the Primer, he’s the slimer,” Simon responds, and this prompts Teena’s abrupt departure from the frame.

Simon reaches for the controls on his motorized wheelchair, then zooms out of frame in the same place Teena did.

The feed flicks over to the next camera in Utopia 3, as Simon asks, “Hey, where are you going?”

“I’m headed back to my shitty accommodations to contemplate my mortality,” Teena says, emotionless.

“No, no, no, Teena. C’mon. We should celebrate...before it’s too late,” Simon says.

Teena stops her departure, and turns to her wheel-chaired frenemy, then says, “If the baby fart-pocalypse occurs before we meet again, let me say this now, it has been a joy knowing you.”

Simon nods at this, and the moment the general turns away from him, he says, “Hey, Teena. One last thing.”

She turns back, not in the mood, and asks, “Yeah?”

“I’ll tell you on the roof,” Simon says.

“Just tell me here,” Teena requests, hand on her hip.

“Not possible,” Simon teases.

Teena relents, and grumbles, “Fine, fine, fine,” as they walk to an elevator.

We don’t understand why Teena agreed to go to the roof, until they get on the elevator, and the doors shut. Maybe unaware there’s a fisheye lens in the corner of the elevator, Teena finally lets her guard down, and says, “I’m scared, Simon.”

Simon strokes his beard, and nods his head. We think that he’s going to tell Teena that he’s scared too, but then the elevator reaches the roof, and the doors open. Simon extends a hand out, saying, “Ladies first,” then he follows behind Teena.

The feed switches to a security camera on the viewing platform of Utopia 3, and a massive glowing beam of energy illuminates the sky above them like a Treer-made Aurora Borealis.

“*This* will calm your nerves,” Simon says, reaching into his beard, then pulling out a joint.

“Simon, you have to be kidding me,” Teena balks.

“Oh fuck off, Teena. You just said goodbye to me as a person, but you can’t break the rules just a little bit?” Simon spits back, tired of the regimented interactions the general insists upon.

Teena gives into the peer pressure, and she takes the joint, then she lets Simon light it for her.

“How gentlemanly of you, Mr. Theory,” Teena exhales, and Simon merely responds with, “Thank you for doing this.”

Teena is scared, and Simon is lonely, and neither of them can share these truths with anyone else because Teena is a general and Simon is an oracle.

Teena hits the joint twice and we watch her momentarily become a college girl again- like she’s bled through time with a less-intense high.

Simon is passed the joint, and he's practically giggling even before he takes a hit. He takes two deep pulls, holding them in, then he exhales a cloud of smoke that mixes with the fog coming from the Tidal Generator. Passing the joint back to Teena, Simon says, "You know the entire concept of a Primer has very specific implications about the chosen one."

"After two hits, this is where we are? Two hits- that was all you took! What are you going to sound like when this thing is a roach?" Teena responds, returning to her pre-joint level of agitation.

"I'm saying all of this because there's a very specific and limited window of space and time in which the chosen one can appear. And it's our responsibility as a species to make sure that we don't screw up our one chance at eternal salvation."

We can hear the joint crackling on the audio feed as Teena hits it, which makes us think that Simon needs a better dealer. Teena holds in the smoke as she seems to think about the entirety of what Simon has said, then she exhales, and responds, between coughs, "I don't know how you feel... but I want out... I don't want the whimper... I want the bang... I don't want to oversee battles forever... It seems like the only way there can be peace..."

"...is to just end it," Simon says.

"The only way to get a break is eternal salvation."

"Eternal salvation," Simon repeats, almost mocking her.

Then, for a moment, we get to linger with Simon and Teena as they stare out at the Tidal Generator, and seem to find a calm, together. Teena is no longer scared; Simon is no longer alone.

We look over our shoulder, at the same time Pilot does, and in this bliss, we all stare at the glowing generator as the descending night consumes everything.

After a prolonged vacation from the screen, we realize there's no audio playing, and we think we're done for the night, until we turn back to the laptop and see that there is audio playing, it just happens to be camouflaged in the noise around us.

Boxer's hooded visage is in the center of the screen, and he's standing on the beach, in the direct sight-line of Pilot's rifle.

We gasp, and Pilot doesn't laugh at us for this pathetic reaction.

We watch Boxer, not on the screen, but in the cold reality, as he stares off at the crashing ocean waves... or maybe he's looking up to the rift.

We're distracted by the laptop, as the feed clicks over to a security camera in an alley near the pier. No longer with the *NOW* girls, Krysta is leaning on the wall in the alley, and from her profile, we can see she's smiling at Boxer, who can't see her and likely doesn't know she's there. Suddenly, Fortunio enters the frame and slams Krysta against the wall, her head making a hollow noise that causes our shoulders to jolt.

Fortunio gains our full attention, as he growls at Krysta, "Where is he?"

"Relax," Krysta demands, trying to get out of Fortunio's grip, and failing.

"You had one job- keep him in that fucking house."

"He's close enough that if I scream, he'll come to help me," Krysta says to Fortunio, almost as a taunt.

"It won't just be him that shows up- other people will too- and they'll recognize him, but you must know that because you can predict the future, right?" Fortunio taunts Krysta, his grip on her still tight.

"Let me go, and we'll go get him," Krysta requests through gritted teeth.

"You no longer call the shots. Your screenplay sucks and you don't know shit. I make the decisions about what goes on in my house, and who gets to leave," Fortunio states, laying out some new rules.

Krysta takes a long look at Fortunio, then says, "I know that you're so freaked out about Boxer being gone because you're in cahoots with the nerds in the Neo-Marxist underground, and you're going to use Boxer as a political pawn."

"You- what- huh?" Fortunio resets three times in a row, then shakes Krysta by her arms, and says, "Let me make something clear. I don't give a rat's ass about politics. I don't care who wins the election."

"You're right- you don't- but the same system your sad little friends are fighting is what's gotten you so hot for Boxer. You're working with fucking nerds, Fortunio, and nerds get swirlies. Even the bald ones."

"Oh, don't act like you're any different. Plus, let's not forget that *I* was the one who pulled Boxer into my car. *I* stumbled across the opportunity of a lifetime out there in the desert, and *I* won't let you fuck it up! You'll play ball... or else," Fortunio threatens, embodying the pimp role completely.

"Fine. I'll get him, and I'll bring him home," Krysta says, and with this statement of compliance, Fortunio lets her go.

Krysta stays in one place, as Fortunio leaves the frame. She waits, and waits, and waits, but no one comes up to her to ask if she's okay, including Boxer. She's all alone.

The feed clicks over, back to Pilot's rifle sight, but the frame is empty. Almost in a panic, the various cameras are hopscotched, flipping from security camera to security camera. We now have a total certainty that we're in real time. We have to wonder if Pilot can still predict what will happen.

"Where did Boxer go?" we ask.

*"Wait for it."*

We feel the turret move, its tinny voice command joining the conversation, then we watch as Pilot's scope settles on Boxer in the middle of the footprint-less sand. We watch Boxer's hand rise to his neck, and even under the cloak of night we know that he's injecting himself with a Treer syringe. Our instincts are confirmed as Boxer falls to his knees. After a moment of wavering in the wind, he face-plants into the sand, appearing just as we first saw him. We look to our left, and we see that Pilot's finger is on the trigger.

"Don't shoot," we say.

*"Don't get so distracted."*

We look to the screen and we see that we're now feed-hopping as Ronald Taverner is walking in the alley that Krysta and Fortunio were fighting. He looks down the alley, but there's no one there- it's empty.

Ronald must have been in O'Brien's, to pad out the crowd for Zora, and maybe as a payment for his fake laughs, he was granted this small amount of time to walk around and experience life.

Since Boxer is currently helpless, we focus on Ronald, who seems to be awed by all that is around him. A puzzle is being reassembled inside Ronald Taverner, and we feel disparate elements of our vacation collide, as he makes a slight diversion from his path when he notices Walter's ice cream truck parked near the sidewalk cafe.

The feed flips over to Walter's dashcam, and we hear Ronald say, "Hi. I'd like... one ice cream," and he sounds like an alien when he makes this request- like he's reading off a script.

"No can do," Walter responds, not even looking out his window.

"But that feels like the most accessible order possible to make here," Ronald points out, sounding confused both about why he wants ice cream, and also why he can't have it.

"Come back later, okay?" Walter tells him, then he turns to Ronald and winks at him.

"Okay. I will. Thank you," Ronald says, giving up, likely because he lacks hunger.

The feed clicks over to the security cameras again, and as Ronald walks away from the truck, we hear Walter say, "God bless."

The feed follows Ronald on his return back to the Neo-Marxist headquarters, but before he reaches his destination, something stops him in his tracks and seems to genuinely concern him. Due to the angle of the camera, we can't see what he's looking at, but he's totally consumed by... something.

In the same way that Ronald is hypnotized by whatever is on the wall that he's staring at, Pilot leans forward, transfixed as well.

"What's he looking at?" we have to ask.

Pilot doesn't respond.

For thirty seconds, we stare at Ronald, who stares at the wall, and in a moment that strikes us to our core, we see two trails of tears slide down Ronald's face.

Pilot quickly gets off the turret, and we look to him, trying to locate the reason why he can't watch this. "Do you know what he's looking at?" we ask.

*"We're done for the night."*

We want an answer, so we start to say, "There's still foot-" but we're interrupted by Pilot.

*"-go. Please."*

Slowly, and without grace, we get off the turret.

We pause, but Pilot is standing at the far edge of the roof, looking to the rift, and he ignores us, so we accept that this is enough for today.

Climbing down off the roof, alone- and cutting through the Mariasol, alone, we feel cheated.

We've become a team with Pilot, and he ended tonight without explanation.

As we walk the pier, the story in the ice cream truck barrels forward in our mind, and suddenly we're running away from the Mariasol. We know

that Pilot can see us, and we listen for him to call out, but he never does. We wait for him to shoot a warning shot that will cause us to freeze, but he never does. We calculate where Roland is by recalling the path he took from the ice cream truck, then we retrace his steps.

Our new knowledge carries us, and we find the exact location we saw Ronald on the feed.

We're alone here, but it doesn't matter.

We look up to where Roland was focused, and we feel tears in our eyes.

The poster we're looking up at features a massive picture of Pilot's scarred face, and in big block text are the two words, "NEVER FORGET."

We're certain that Ronald Taverner broke down when he saw Pilot's face, and the scar that marks it, because his brother, Private Roland Taverner of the US Army, was Pilot Abilene's best friend.

Friendly fire.



IV-

TEMPTATION WAITS- JULY 2<sup>ND</sup> 2008

Again seeking solace in information, we take out our computer and we spend our morning reading *The Power*:

**INT. BLACK BARN -- DAWN**

After an all-night tattoo session, Jericho sits up on the cruciform table, and we get a good look at his fresh tattoos... Various RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS share space on his torso, and we know that this is not a chestpiece of peace.

Without a word, Muriel begins to wrap Jericho's body, and the "armor" that he received is covered in gauze, buffing Jericho up to an even larger size. As Muriel moves around him, the sexual tension between the two of them is palpable... For the first time, Jericho is fragile, and Muriel is working to protect him.

**EXT. BLACK BARN -- DAWN**

Serpentine stands on the porch of the BLACK FARMHOUSE... a BOA CONSTRICTOR is draped over her shoulders, Britney-style.

Jericho, Caleb, and Muriel are now inside the UPU2 cruiser. Muriel is in the driver's seat. Jericho is holding Caleb.

SERPENTINE

Do not forget to feed da chosen one.  
You must feed him every hour or he  
will lose his strength and grow  
irritable. You do not want to see  
what happens when da chosen one gets  
cranky.

JERICHO

What does he snack on? I mean, the  
only thing I've ever seen him eat is  
his way out of a snake.

SERPENTINE

Good luck... Mistah Cane...

JERICHO

That literally answered zero of my  
questions, and you could enhance my  
future prospects tenfold by merely  
giving me a suggestion regarding what  
I should feed this kid.

Serpentine takes a drag from her cigarette and blows  
smoke in their direction, so Muriel puts the car into  
drive and speeds off, protecting baby Caleb.

**EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY -- MORNING**

The UPU2 CRUISER drives east... approaching the STATE  
LINE. Traffic is grid-locked at the MILITARY CHECKPOINT  
up ahead.

**INT. UPU2 CRUISER -- NEXT**

Caleb is asleep in the back seat, on Boxer's lap. He's  
physically grown to a size that resembles a THREE-YEAR-  
OLD.

Muriel looks at the CLOCK on the dash.

MURIEL

It's been more than an hour. We  
should feed Caleb.

JERICHO

Alright. Swerve toward the next snake  
you see in the road.

Muriel smiles at this joke, then taps the steering  
wheel, and searches the road ahead for a spot to stop.  
Her eyes go wide as she spies a WAVING GOLDEN CALF up  
ahead.

MURIEL

Mooby's! We have to pull over and go  
to that Mooby's.

She hits the TURN SIGNAL and begins to merge into the  
exit lane.

JERICHO

Instead of the drive-through, let's  
go inside. Mooby's is the one place  
where Caleb's egregious farting will  
be considered normal. He'll be safe  
there.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- MOMENTS LATER**

Muriel gets out of the cruiser, and opens the door for  
Jericho and Caleb.

Baby Caleb gets out of the car under his own power, and  
he WALKS with Jericho and Muriel across the parking  
lot.

JERICHO

He's growing. He's walking. He murdered a snake that tried to consume him... boy, do they grow up fast.

Caleb looks around the parking lot... then he points up at the Mooby's sign.

CALEB

Mooby's!

Jericho raises an eyebrow.

JERICHO

Who in the helllll taught him to read?

MURIEL

He notices everything we say and do. That was him mimicking me spotting this place.

ACROSS THE PARKING LOT... a BLACK LIMOUSINE is idling.

The REAR WINDOW rolls down and a SMALL PIGGISH MAN (50's) watches the group approach the restaurant.

PIGGISH MAN

The specimen is evolving at a greater speed than predicted. I thought we'd have more time.

**INT. LIMOUSINE -- NEXT**

Seated next to the Piggish Man is a MAN IN A WHITE LAB COAT (40's).

The man in the white lab coat points a LONG LENS CAMERA toward the open window and begins to snap photos of the group just before they disappear inside the restaurant.

MAN IN THE WHITE LAB COAT

You hired Muriel Fox?

PIGGISH MAN

Of course! She's the most prominent psychic in North America.

MAN IN THE WHITE LAB COAT

She's also a genius oceanographer.

PIGGISH MAN

Definitely.

MAN IN THE WHITE LAB COAT

Unquestionably.

PIGGISH MAN

She's really smart. So smart... I suspect she's clairvoyant.

MAN IN THE WHITE LAB COAT

That is a verifiable science fact, which I can confirm, as a scientist.

(Beat)

Now that they have the specimen, shouldn't we take them all into custody?

PIGGISH MAN

No. Not yet. The specimen must spend time with Jericho. They must bond so they can follow the path together.

The Man In The White Lab coat smiles.

MAN IN THE WHITE LAB COAT  
The road not taken.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- NEXT**

The window rolls up and the limousine drives off.

**INT. MOOBY'S -- NEXT**

The Mooby's is filled with several dozen MORBIDLY OBESE PALMDALE RESIDENTS and their CHILDREN. Jericho eyes them all.

JERICHO  
I've never seen so many fat people.

MURIEL  
You've never eaten at Mooby's before?

CALEB  
I haven't.

MURIEL  
Because you're only six days old.

CALEB  
How old are you?

MURIEL  
18.

Caleb fully accepts this without questioning it or asking to see ID, and everyone definitely believes Muriel is 18.

Muriel arrives at the counter and stares at THE CASHIER with a confused look- like she knows the woman behind the register.

THE CASHIER is SHAWNA MCBRIDE (27)... twin sister of the late Tawna McBride. We know this because her name tag reads: SHAWNA and she looks pretty damn similar to Tawna.

SHAWNA

Welcome to Mooby's. May I take your order?

MURIEL

Shawna McBride?

Shawna furrows her brow.

SHAWNA

Yeah? Do I know you?

MURIEL

You're the Tawna's twin.

SHAWNA

Are you with the UPU?

Jericho steps forward.

JERICHO

I am. I'm UPU2.

Shawna presses a button on the register.

JERICHO

Why did you press that button?

SHAWNA

Just working on your order, officer.

JERICHO

Please don't cum on my fries.

SHAWNA

You don't have to worry about that.  
None of the guys on this shift have  
ever made me cum before.

JERICHO

Alright, then please don't let the  
other people on the shift cum in or  
on my food.

Shawna hits numerous keys on the register.

Jericho looks absolutely terrified.

MURIEL

I need to tell you something. There's  
no good time to mention this, Shawna,  
but... your sister is dead. She was  
shot, protecting her son. And don't  
worry, Caleb is safe with us... but  
Tawna... she didn't make it.

Shawna's upper lip begins to quiver as she realizes  
that Muriel is serious



JERICHO

She wasn't even close to making it,  
if we're being honest.

**INT. MOOBY'S -- BOOTH -- NEXT.**

Shawna now sits across from Muriel in a BOOTH, sobbing quietly.

SHAWNA

...that last tour really rewired Rick  
in a nasty way. At first, Tawna  
thought it was the blast finally  
catching up to him because he got  
exposed to a little bit of radiation  
near El Paso... but it was something  
that happened in Iraq that fucked him  
up majorly. Some drug testing he  
volunteered for. Or that he was  
volunteered for against his wishes.

MURIEL

Are you saying that he didn't have a  
choice?

SHAWNA

He was given an ultimatum- either he  
could join The Program... or they'd  
send him out to the desert to dig  
these... holes.

MURIEL

They wanted him to dig holes? Did he  
mention anything about constructing a  
sand maze?

Shawna shakes her head no.

SHAWNA

Can I admit something?

MURIEL

Absolutely.

SHAWNA

When I saw you here, I felt scared,  
because I had a dream about you.

MURIEL

What happened in the dream?

SHAWNA

I never would have told you this, but  
you mentioning Tawna dying is a  
coincidence.

MURIEL

Why? Did I die in your dream?

SHAWNA

No. You lived.

MURIEL

Who died?

Shawna raises her finger and points at Jericho.

JERICHO

That's not possible.

SHAWNA

Jericho Cane was sacrificed. He died  
in your arms, high above the Tower of  
Fire.

Muriel is transfixed by Shawna... and horrified at the thought of Jericho's death.

SHAWNA

I think you will die as well, Muriel.

JERICO

She doesn't know what she's talking about. I'm getting out of here and (taking Caleb-)

SHAWNA (Over)

(-yes, Mr.) Cane. Leave with the boy. I take no pleasure in telling you this, but you must kill Muriel to save the world.

JERICO

I'll never do that.

SHAWNA

Then I hope she's not as much of a coward as you are.

JERICO

You don't know what you're talking about.

Caleb pulls on Jericho's shirt. Jericho bends down to hear what he has to say.

CALEB (Whispering)

The path to salvation will be drenched in the blood of those who have sinned.

JERICO

Who amongst us hasn't sinned?

CALEB (Whispering)  
Exactly.

Instead of continuing on with the screenplay, we minimize it, then bring up Firefox. We decide to do something that Boxer Santaros can't- we're going to google someone.

Of all the people we could google, we choose Baron. He seems to be the one at the center of everything... well, not so much when it comes to the Neo-Marxist grievance factory, but liberals never have any money to fund their own movements so Baron probably sends cash their way, if for no other reason than to feel even more powerful.

We google "Baron von Westphalen interview" and we find this month's *Wired* cover story in the news section.

We click on the link and we're directed to a page that jarringly leads with a picture of Baron, dressed like a baked potato, standing in front of a massive skyscraper that looms large in the LA skyline, disappearing into the clouds. This is the first exterior picture of Treer Tower we've ever seen. It looks appropriately evil.

We begin reading this *Wired* profile out of sheer curiosity about a man who seemed to just appear in the American landscape, saving us from our addiction to crude.

It reads:

*"Baron von Westphalen stares at me, awaiting my reaction to a commercial for his new FluidKar, The Saltair. I immediately reconsider taking my assignment from Wired after previewing the commercial, primarily because the ad was about one Treer Saltair having sexual intercourse with a Treer Saltair parked across the street.*

*"So, what did you think of our new promo material?" Mr. von Westphalen asked, his heavy lisp misting the space between us.*

*"You mean 'porno' material?" we asked back.*

*"The commercial! What do you think?" Baron responded.*

*"I've never seen a commercial like it," I said, swallowing an awkward gulp at some point in the middle of the response.*

*"When I first arrived in America, I loved how consumerism and sex were kissing cousins," Baron told us, maybe because he thought we'd find it helpful in understanding his influences.*

*“So this ad...” I said, then trailed off, hoping to lead him toward what possessed him to commit this idea to CGI.*

*“Exactly!” Baron celebrated, then we sat in relative silence for ten seconds, until he punctuated the moment by giving me a thumbs-up.*

*Baron von Westphalen, or, as he requested I call him, “The Baron,” is a man that indisputably has brought unforeseen projects to American soil and revolutionized industries.*

*The Baron was born in the town of Trier, Germany. His mother, Inga, was the grand-daughter of Jenny von Westphalen, the baby-mama of Karl Marx. Inga had found wealth and fame working as an architect, then later founded Treer Industries- a leading German defense contractor.*

*After the tragic attacks in Texas, the government needed to expand the capabilities of its war machine, so Inga landed an exclusive contract with the Pentagon to design and construct twelve 900-foot zeppelins. These airships would be used to transport troops and cargo into combat zones in the Middle East. Like the revolutionary genius, Howard Hughes, Inga had a spruce goose of her own in the form of not just a zeppelin, but a “mega-zeppelin.” After Inga and Baron proved their ability to deliver innovative products on-budget, and ahead of schedule, a 40 billion dollar first-look defense contract was signed in 2006. A single aeronautics venture had launched Treer Industries into one of the most influential corporations in America, and the entire world waited to see what their future-focus would be.*

*Seeing the potential for additional lucrative contracts with the Pentagon, Inga named her son, Baron, as head of a top-secret alternative fuel project. With a healthy budget, an intense curiosity, and a crazy theory, The Baron sent a remote excavation unit on a dig below the Mediterranean, off the coast of Israel. This excavation involved digging deep within the Earth’s mantle, and when the REU broke through a wall of rock on the outer rim of the Earth’s mantle, it became submerged in fluid. This fluid was from a deep trench that twists and turns for miles upon miles, wrapping itself around the core of the Earth like a snake around an apple. When announcing the discovery, The Baron christened it the “Serpent Trench,” then he proceeded to buy the company that makes the drill bits that got them there, as well as the patents for the equipment they used.*

Before long, Treer had pumped millions of gallons of this unique and intriguing fluid up into an ocean rig in the Mediterranean named Utopia 1. The fluid they extracted was casually referred to as “the elixir of God,” but an intense protest from atheist groups prevented the term from being widely accepted. Prominent atheists are on record as suggesting we call it “the elixir of life,” but then the women's rights groups felt that the “pro-life” leaning of the elixir of life term was unacceptable and they also alleged that this fluid was being unwillingly extracted from mother Earth and suggested calling it “Patriarchal Essence-Rape Fluid,” so eventually, Treer just settled on calling it Fluid Karma.

With an implementation speed that shocked even the most optimistic analysts, Fluid Karma quickly became gasoline's slutty older sister when The Baron and his team proved without question that an energy field began to form when the elixir was exposed to the oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere.

The Baron specially customized a blend of Fluid Karma that, when oxidized, created a powerful-but-range-limited field that cascaded out of the Tidal Generator infrastructure he erected on both coasts.

Due to the unique properties of the energy field, Treer was in the driver's seat as far as releasing products that were able to tap into the Liquid Karma, and they also were in the unique position to force any company that wanted to make a Fluid Karma enabled product to pay a license fee to Treer.

The country's automobile industry scrambled to innovate so that their “gas guzzlers” weren't looked at like a stable horse during the rise of the Model-T.

Suddenly involved in virtually every industry in the market, Treer Industries has become one of the richest companies in not only America, but the world, with a seemingly endless amount of cash-on-hand.

Given this impressive war chest that could easily be used for expansion and re-investment, some are saying that Treer is failing in their duty to provide equal and fair service to all of the nation. The energy field that the Tidal Generator can pump out has conversion areas of several thousand miles, but Treer engineers encountered a problem that the field is weakest in the middle of the country. When I discussed this with The Baron, he dismissed the critique by saying, “Everything is weaker in the middle of America.” When I didn't laugh at this, I was

*invited to view a production model of the “Fluid Duplicator” which has recently been distributed out to population centers across the Midwest. The Baron showed me a long, coffin-like box, and he asked me to put my Treer laptop inside the box. I did what was asked, and Baron closed the lid. Through a clear portion of the box, Baron pointed down at the laptop and noted it switched over to its emergency battery- something that only happens when the strength of the energy field depletes below the minimum power thresholds to run the machine. The Baron turned on one of the Fluid Duplicators- a grapefruit sized, perpetually flashing ball- and I saw that, even despite the interference from the box, the laptop was receiving power without utilizing its emergency battery. The Baron explained that the Fluid Duplicator contains pure Liquid Karma which circles the interior of the ball, just as it wraps around the Earth's core, and when the power button is pressed, a small amount of the fluid exits the device and is oxidized.*

*The location of these Fluid Duplicators is top-secret, due to the fact that there's another use for Liquid Karma which is sweeping the nation.*

*The very same liquid inside a Fluid Duplicator, when extracted, then injected into the bloodstream, produces hallucinatory effects. Rumors of government programs testing Liquid Karma both for treatment of PTSD and to enhance emotion-suppression for combat- while unsubstantiated- certainly don't seem out of the realm of speculative possibility.*

*During my time with The Baron, I found that a great number of his statements seem to be talking points that I've encountered elsewhere in my research. He would repeatedly declare the Earth's oceans to be the “world's first perpetual motion machines,” he would repeatedly declare, “No longer will blood and oil be bound together,” and he would repeatedly declare, “Mega-zeppelins are fun! Live a little, buddy!”*

*It was only after my second day with Baron that I finally was able to glimpse inside the expansive office of his mother, Inga von Westphalen. What I saw was nothing short of a woman running a company with a locomotive passion and drive. Her workspace was buzzing with light boards of information, and employees constantly glided in and out of her office handing off paperwork and pitching new innovations. There were even pieces of physical technology being assembled on the floor of the office, possibly by her design and implementation alone.*

*After phoning my editor at Wired from an open desk in Treer Tower 1, I told him my findings, and we agreed that this piece should not be about Baron von Westphalen at all- I needed to be writing about Inga von Westphalen. She was the one with the ideas, she was the one with the plan for the future, and she was the one with a notion of why a mega-zeppelin is necessary beyond just, "We have our own ice cream bar in the mega-zeppelin. Even God himself hasn't enjoyed some rocky road a thousand feet above the congested roads of Los Angeles."*

*The moment I ended this call with my editor, I encountered a beautiful Treer executive who introduced herself as Shé Nǚwáng. Shé took me by the arm, walked me to the elevator, placed her clear key card in the reader, then selected the ground floor.*

*"Inform your editor we'll be sending a photograph you'll be using for the cover," Shé told me, a Chinese accent painting her words, which, I quickly understood, were a goodbye, and the beginning of the end regarding the cover story my job depended on.*

*So, not by my choice, this is the end, my friend. Wired prides itself in offering reporting that is interesting to all, while technical enough that it challenges those with a greater understanding and interest in the innovations that power our ever-changing world. I believe I've failed on both accounts to capture the goals set forth by this publication, and this is why I have formally requested to cover the inaugural flight of the Treer mega-zeppelin. At press time, the only response I've received from Treer regarding the press pass inquiry was, "At this time, no press passes are being issued because all will have no choice but to watch in awe as Treer reshapes our world yet again. Arrive, behold."*

*We don't keep scrolling to check the comments because after reading this piece, we join the author in his refocused interest in Inga. It would appear that the women in Treer industries are running things, while "The Baron" is nothing more than a decoy intended to frustrate the press into not digging too deep into the corporation. There's no doubt in our mind that this reporter was escorted out of the building by Serpentine, and her surveillance of the phone calls placed in the tower echoes another powerful woman- Nana Mae Frost.*

*We decide to google the name that Serpentine gave- Shé Nǚwáng- and predictably, we find nothing. As we study the name, we have to wonder if it's a pun about Asians making the most passable transsexuals- she knew*



wang. We momentarily scold ourselves for being absurd, then we remember that, up until this point, we genuinely thought a grown woman's entire name was merely "Serpentine."

We close our laptop, then get ready for another day in the sun, where we'll hopefully acquire deeper knowledge of what has already transpired and what the next two days may hold. We begin to worry that Nana Mae is reading our Google searches, then changing what we see based on what she wants us to know. If she has the ability to monitor everyone's communications, does she also have the ability to modify the information they access? A simple URL redirect could send us from a legitimate search result to a modified webpage that her team constructed to fit a narrative. The googling we just did could adversely impact us, but like Pilot pointed out before, once Nana Mae has noticed a mistake, there's no rectifying the situation, there's only a mitigation of potential avenues for her to get her vengeance.

To busy our mind, we try to imagine what the purpose of a non-military mega-zeppelin will actually be. The only other time we'd heard about a massive plan for a zeppelin was in a semi-obscure novel by Thomas Harris where terrorists planned to fly a blimp over the Super Bowl, then blow it up. The guy who wrote *Silence of the Lambs* wrote this novel, and as time passed, the guy in the blimp became scarier to us than the lone cannibal in a cell. We'd rather hear that our therapist is crazy too, instead of hearing a blast while at a live sporting event.

For the commute today, we don't take our laptop, nor do we take our Bible. In our rental FluidKar, we listen to various FM radio stations, and our fears are confirmed. The hip hop stations are playing uncensored Brotha Lynch Hung, every pop station is playing "How Bizarre" by OMC on repeat, the sports-talk radio stations are calling for the public lynching of the Clipper's owner for last season's performance. We don't look to the cloudless sky, because we don't want to see the rift. We know the rift is expanding because we can feel it.

The predictable morning rush hour traffic is colored with extremes, and the road rage is more severe than we've ever seen. Since we have an increasing familiarity with the area, we decide to take some roads less traveled, so we throw on a blinker, and blaze our own trail. During a portion of our detour, while we're waiting at a traffic light, we glance up, and see Pilot. The last time we encountered Pilot like this, we burst into

tears, and this time, the billboard of Pilot makes us guffaw. It's not just the American hero, Private Abilene, on this ad- he's joined by Krysta, Sheena, and Shoshana. All three girls are wrapping their arms around his fatigues, and next to his serious, scarred face, is the bold message, "RETURNING SOLDIERS, REMEMBER... YOU'RE A PIMP, AND PIMPS DON'T COMMIT SUICIDE."

This is a mental health campaign created and funded by the government to quell the increase in returning soldier suicides, and the statement, in its absurdity, becomes the only piece of ad copy to stay with us, even after we're on a new road, in front of new billboards.

When we reach the parking lot in Santa Monica, we see Pilot's Firebird, and we park next to it. We won't leave that turret until he agrees to walk us back here. Last night ended in a way that we don't want to replicate.

We have some time, so instead of making our way to the Mariasol, we decide to revert back to being a tourist for a short period of time.

The truth is, we want a drink. It's morning, but it's our vacation, and other than those Budweisers in the ice cream truck, we've been totally sober.

We walk to the burger place where we grabbed dinner last night, but it isn't open. Most stores and restaurants in Santa Monica have sleepy hours of operation.

With few options, we decide to get adventurous and we approach an elderly black man wearing large boxy sunglasses who's standing next to a cooler.

"Excuse me, sir. Do you have any Bud for sale," we ask, keeping a respectful distance.

The man runs his hand along his gray five o'clock shadow, then in a deep croak of a voice, he says, "Ah, well, I can show you were to get a prescription. If you speak to Dr. Feelgood-"

"-oops. Sorry," we say, smiling at our hazy, unspecific question, "That was a question about Budweiser. Do you have any Budweiser for sale?"

"Oh, no sir. I don't," the man responds, then asks, "Little early to be tying one on don't ya think?"

"Not when today is a vacation day."

"That's how it started with me too. Showed up in LA on vacation. Found myself wrapped up in somethin' I didn't know how to get out of, then

ended up reachin' for a drink in the morning, and now, twenty years later, here I am. Sellin' energy drinks on the pier."

Palming a twenty, we say, "Two of those energy drinks would probably be a decent Bud Light substitute, right?"

"Two of these drinks will likely put you into cardiac arrest," the man says.

"You're right. We got all day. Slow and steady," we respond, genuinely enjoying this interaction.

The man nods at this because to react any other way could jeopardize a sale. He groans as he bends down and pops open the cooler, then he dips his hands into a sea of ice and comes up with two tall aluminum energy drink cans. On both cans are pictures of Krysta Now.

*Of course*, this is our fate, these two identical images of Krysta were patiently waiting in that rectangular cooler for us to arrive. We're tempted to ask for a third drink, just to see if there's anything else in the ice-bath.

We're handed the drinks, and we notice that on the label where they usually have a message from the manufacturer, printed in handwriting script is a quip from Krysta that merely says, "In your dreams, nerd."

We hand the old man a twenty, and he begins to make change, but we say, "Don't worry about it."

The man pockets the cash then removes his sunglasses, and we see that his right eye is clouded over. He winks at us, then says, "Make the most of what's left of your time here."

"We absolutely will," we assure him.

As we walk in the opposite direction of the turret, we open one of the cans, and instead of taking a sip to test how putrid Krysta's sugar liquid mix is, we choose to consume it in massive Adam's apple bopping gulps just to get the caffeine in our bloodstream. Halfway through our college-kid-chug, we're shocked to find that Krysta's drink tastes really, really good. We save a tiny bit in the bottom of the can, then pour it into the sand, curious what color this elixir is. It's a bright pink, of course, which is so predictable that it's satisfying.

Jittering with the drink raging through us, we feel drawn toward the water, and that's when we see a lone woman, sitting on a bench, waiting... for something. Head wrapped in a scarf, massive Chanel sunglasses covering her eyes, this woman still looks beautiful, even concealed. She stares out toward the ocean, and when we turn to see what has her

attention, we're struck with nostalgia because lying in the sand is Boxer Santaros.

We hold up the energy drink can and the profile on the can matches that of the woman watching over Boxer.

With a casual saunter, we approach the bench, excited that we're at the same place, at the same time, as two people we've watched for hundreds of hours before we arrived in LA, and dozens of hours since arriving.

We sit down on the left side of the bench, and Krysta remains on the right side. We put the cans between us.

Maybe that second can wasn't for Pilot, maybe it was for Krysta, maybe it was for Boxer?

When Krysta doesn't glance over to see what we've set on the bench, we try to formulate the perfect introductory statement. We want to make it clear that we're a fan, and we want to tell her that her work allowed us to have an intimate sexual understanding that we needed in order to arrive at college and confidently enjoy the benefits of being there, but we also want to include the part about how we're actively attempting to stave off the end of the world and we believe she's a key to this battle so it would be really great if she didn't engage in any actions that a horseman would take. This could be our only chance to alter the timeline, redirect her course, and divert the apocalypse.

As we try to think of what to say, and how to help, we stare out at the ocean that ceaselessly crashes forward, as it has for millions of years, and we can't imagine a future where this ocean doesn't continue to reach and rescind. It will endure, will we?

Krysta Now doesn't need our words, she needs our help.

To our right, in the distance, is the Mariasol. Pilot, feet up, is reading from his Bible, but his sight is focused on Boxer, ready. At this distance, he can't speak to Boxer- he can only appreciate, observe, and learn from what he's being shown on the screen and in the sight. Meanwhile, we're actually here- we can go wake up Boxer, we can warn Krysta about the rift, we could call the number on the Eliot/Frost campaign poster behind us, and let them know exactly where Madeline's husband is. Pilot might be sitting behind a rifle, but we feel like we have more power.

We pick up the drink we bought for Pilot, and instead of discussing the future with these celebrities, we decide to climb onto the roof of the Mariasol and share this drink with our friend.

Krysta, by our side, demands nothing from us, and we come to the realization that, yes, Pilot is the engineer responsible for reprogramming the apocalypse, but we're more than the duck that sits next to him as he reasons out what must be done. We don't belong down here, we belong up there.

We leave the bench, carrying the energy drink we got for Pilot, leaving Krysta to continue her vigil over Boxer alone. We leave our empty can for Krysta to notice. We want her to feel like there's a future in her business ventures. We leave these massive celebrities, and we don't look back. If we want to watch, we can do so from the roof.

Right before we walk onto the pier, we nearly step on a little electronic toy soldier crawling along the pavement. We reach down and pick up the toy, to turn it off, but then we remember toys like this run on Fluid Karma now. This soldier can crawl until someone steps on him and fractures his body. Otherwise, his repetitive belly-down trek may never end.

As we make our way down the pier, we don't look to Pilot, nor to the rift

Passing through the Mariasol, we wish everyone good morning, but we see that it's not a good morning for the employees here. They've arrived early, but they've arrived in peril. One of them is on their phone, in the middle of an argument. Another is bleeding from the nose, and not doing anything about it. We don't intervene, we don't hand over a tissue. None of this is our business. They chose to work at the Mariasol, which is close to Utopia 3, which is home to the Tidal Generator, which is ripping apart space-time as we know it.

The moment we get onto the roof, we toss the energy drink like a football, and Pilot- after only glancing up from his Bible for a fraction of a second- catches the can with one hand. He studies the label, and smiles.

*"You hear the rumor about these?"*

"Oh no. What?" we ask, taking our seat at the turret.

*"The night after you drink this, you're supposed to see Krysta in your dreams."*

"The 'In your dreams, nerd' inscription was literal?" we ask.

*"Guess we'll find out."*

Pilot pulls the tab on the drink, then takes a large gulp.

We're about to mention to Pilot that we met Krysta this morning, but we didn't really meet her, and we know that he saw the whole thing from his omnipotent perch.

Pilot chugs the energy drink, looks at the can, then shakes his head.

*"No one bursts a thirst like Krysta Now."*

"The poster boy also writes copy," we respond, and we think this is going to open up a little conversation about Pilot's best friend, but the words never come.

We stare at the blank screen of the laptop, and we're stuck on how we left things- that's probably why we brought a gift this morning- so we end up asking, "What did we miss at the end of the feed last night?"

*"You appeared on this screen for a second time."*

Our heart drops, and we immediately become paranoid that the first time we appeared on this laptop screen was when we brought up that Krysta Now video on our laptop after agreeing to the charge of four bucks extra on our room tab in exchange for the high-speed WiFi password.

*"The 4<sup>th</sup>..."*

"Right," we say, and this is the first time that terrible day feels like a relief. Maybe Krysta is right; maybe we *are* all repressed nerds.

Looking out toward the edge of the tide, we see an argument happening between either a teenage couple, or a brother and a sister.

"This day at the beach is going to be no day-at-the-beach," we remark, still worried about the waitress with the bloody nose in the Mariasol.

*"On the plus side, this will be the least-worst day of the rest of the week."*

We try to remember what day it is without looking at our phone.

We backtrack to the last date that we're sure of. We know that on Thursday, June 26, 2008, Boxer Santaros, a famous action star with ties to the Republican Party, vanished without a trace. Three days later, he was discovered in the Nevada desert with his memory erased. Three days after his disappearance would put the date at... Sunday the 29th? The first day we saw Boxer was on that Sunday, and he rode the roller coaster that night and breached space-time.

There are 30 days in June, and we've had the screenplay for at least three days, so... today... is... July 2nd?

If these calculations are right, we have today, tomorrow, and the next day, until the end of days.

Seeing that footage we shot on that doomed day in Texas three years ago reminded us of the severity and proximity of danger in American life, and this danger is now even more prevalent in 2008.

We ground ourselves in reality, as we understand it, while things become untethered.

**America, now...**

In the aftermath of the nuclear attacks in Texas, America has found itself on the brink of anarchy. Hundreds of thousands perished in the explosions in Abilene and El Paso, Texas, and as a result, the US government has declared martial law in Texas. FEMA ordered an extended evacuation within 200 miles of each attack. That was the impact of the worst terrorist attack in the history of our country.

**America, now...**

In school, kids watch videos which tell them, "Those without protective masks are instructed to sit down on the ground and face away from the blast." *That's* how this millennial generation is growing up, inhaling the chemical cloud of World War III.

**America, now...**

Despite our fuel issues being resolved, and our TV stars returning home maimed, the war continues to rage on in the Middle East, placing restrictions on our comfort-levels that a day at a crowded event will be something for the whole family to cherish. Americans are now transfixed by the terrorist threat and the will to prevent another attack by any means necessary.

**America, now...**

The players are diverse. Baron continues to pimp Fluid Karma. Inga continues running Treer Industries. General Teena MacArthur continues protecting the infrastructure. Japan continues watching, jealous. We remain on the turret, next to Pilot, in front of a gun.

**America, now...**

Evidenced by the footage we watched of Marxchella, dissenting liberal cells have begun to emerge- the most vocal being the Neo-Marxists- and we've seen all sorts of insane behavior from them. We've even heard a rumor about them hacking off thumbs to rig the election.

**America, now...**

We're at the precipice of the 2008 election, and it appears that the nominees will be decided by the electoral votes of just one state, and the Republicans are racing to not only find their nominee, but also secure California in November for the first time since 1988. This may be complicated by someone who's "missing."

**America, now...**

As the search continues for missing action star, Boxer Santaros, we've decided to silence our knowledge, because we don't want to be detained. There are so many ways that Boxer is "missing." When he returned from the desert with a case of amnesia, with Fortunio as a bridge, he had found someone who had answers- unexplainable answers- regarding a world that had become one big question mark to him. The girl with the answers, was, and is, Krysta Kapowski, better known to us as Krysta Now, and she's written a screenplay that foretells the tale of our destruction, mostly through fart jokes, so we're not really sure what to make of that.

**America, now...**

USIDent, a brainchild of the Republican Party, has grown into a colossal think tank formed under the protection of the Patriot Act. It not only ensures that all information is observed, but also, when necessary, sanitized. Nana Mae Frost is already observing so much of this state- this country- and we have to rely on Pilot to not lead us down the wrong path. The government decided that it couldn't properly conduct a war on terror unless cyberspace was placed under federal control, now profiles are made, and data is stored, and judgments are made.

So, where are we headed?

**America, tomorrow...**

Coming into this weekend, there are celebrations planned across the country, and when Americans celebrate, bad behavior tends to follow. One of the biggest events, with the greatest potential for trouble, is a star-studded concert in Houston that's set to honor the memories of various loved ones lost in Texas, as the city prepares to celebrate Independence Day on the third anniversary of the Abilene attacks.

We know that we can extend our vacation for as long as Pilot needs us, but it's not like we're leaving California anyway. Interstate travel visas are frozen, as the government issues a code-red terror alert for the holiday weekend. Why we didn't take this predictable ban into consideration when we booked the trip in the first place is baffling. Maybe that's why our airline tickets were so cheap? We thought we were getting a deal, when in actuality, we chose our vacation to coincide with this madness. We try to think about why we booked this trip in the first place- why we chose to go alone, and what we planned on doing besides going and meeting someone famous.



Rolling under all of this, we have an increasingly paranoid internal monologue, asking, *“Is this the way the world ends? Is this the way the world ends? Is this the way... the world ends?”*

They say the road not taken concludes with a stairway to heaven, and if that's the case, then the gates will not open for a couple more days, and it's up to us to search for the key.

Despite the fact that the Earth is slowing down, it feels like everything is speeding up.

It's hard to judge how much we should be worried.

During our childhood, we lived in an empire of peace at home, bedrocked with stability.

During our adulthood, we've lived in an empire of uncertainty and instability.

Some empires were built with the tranquil constant of peace throughout the land. Some empires were built in times of war. Some empires lost their identity to war. We know we're living in an empire- we just aren't sure *which* type of empire it is.

This is the current state of the world, and what follows are the sordid tales of what happens next- how it all comes crashing down, according to a surveillance laptop on a turret at the end of the Santa Monica Beach Pier.

Even after putting all of this end-to-end, we feel we're missing so many pieces. The truth is, there's no recap that can bring us up to speed in a 'Last time, on USA: The Show' way, like there was on Pilot's TV show.

Since we don't have an active feed yet, Pilot continues his Bible study, and we don't feel like we're intruding when we try to impress him and instantly fail, saying, “In Revelation 22, it says... can I borrow your Bible?”

*“That's really meta. Maybe it's a take on greed? God could have placed it in there as a test. Ya know, if a person, reading a Bible, asks someone else for their Bible, this displays the selfishness of man.”*

Pilot smiles at his own teasing, and once he sees we're less-than-amused, he hands us his dog-eared Bible.

We flip the thin pages, until we find Revelation 22, then we read;

*“For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away*

*his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."*

Pilot nods at this.

"The question becomes, given that paragraph, will Krysta's screenplay- which follows the Book of Revelation, but adds a lot of farts- cause her to be damned?"

"Yes."

This direct answer throws us, so we keep asking questions, "Will her work be the reason we die?"

"Yes."

"So do we need to stop her from writing the screenplay?"

*"The screenplay is already written."*

"So what do we do?"

*"That's the question that forced me to sit you down here."*

*What do we do?"*

We don't have the answer, and we're saved by the electronic squeak which tells us there's footage to watch. What we see immediately calms us.

The mountain of a man and the mystery of a girl are back together. Boxer and Krysta walk hand-in-hand, back to Fortunio's, outside, yet shut off from the world. Boxer has his hood up, so we can't see his face on any of the cameras, while Krysta still has her scarf around her face, and her sunglasses keep her concealed from the public.

Part of us wants to hop off the roof, then catch up with these two to inform them that their disguises are dangerous because the moment someone covers their face and shies away from Nana Mae's cameras, they're scrutinized like a possible terrorist. Everyone, in an Eliot/Frost America is guilty until they've proven that they're innocent. Even on our flight here we were presumed to be terrorists, and treated as such, until cleared via X-ray scanning and luggage searching. Only once we finished being viewed as guilty were we allowed to board, freshly deemed to be a normal citizen. As Americans, we continue to be transfixed by the threat of terrorism and will go to great lengths to stop another attack, by any means necessary, which means that to go unnoticed, your hood must be down, and your face must be visible, and your backpack must be transparent, and your hands must be empty and raised.

Possibly understanding the risk she's taking, Krysta rushes into the street, and flags down a FluidTaxi, which will take them the rest of the way

to Fortunio's- or maybe that moment in the alley was too much for Krysta, and the Hermosa Beach house will no longer be the headquarters for this complicated game of hide-the-hero.

Since the taxi is a Treer FluidKar, the dashcam captures video and audio of Krysta and Boxer the moment they squish into the back seat. This is another feed to dodge, another risk for the couple, but it's a better option than remaining public as the tourists begin to arrive, and the fights continue to break out at every turn.

The taxi pulls into the flow of traffic, and Krysta asks Boxer, "Did you do Liquid Karma last night?" then she takes off her sunglasses and leans forward to look past Boxer's hood. This has to be bizarre for her- to be on the other side of this conversation. As a pornstar, she must have always had jealous boyfriends who were filled with constant questions about her activities of the night prior. Now, *she* has the questions, and *she* feels the hurt.

"I did Liquid Karma last night," Boxer admits, keeping his head bowed forward so the dashcam can't scan his irises.

Instead of looking disappointed, Krysta appears relieved. She asked a question she knew the answer to, and Boxer told her exactly what she was already well aware of. That sinking feeling in the pit of one's stomach always arrives in a moment of betrayal, but it's generally absent in a moment of confirmation of a known fact.

Krysta speaks freely in the back of the cab and doesn't appear worried about the Middle Eastern looking cab driver because, in Nana Mae Frost's USIDent world, if he was to provide information on his passengers to Nana Mae regarding what he had heard, he'd be putting his own life in America in jeopardy. Nana Mae could take the information he provided, then deem him a spy for getting the information, and this would "force" her to deport him back to wherever he worked so hard to leave just so he could come here and drive a cab that will be autonomous in a couple years, if those years ever come for us.

"Why did you do drugs, knowing it hurts me, when I stopped getting DP'd because I knew it would hurt you- and hurt me a little too- even if the soreness usually goes away pretty fast or whatever?" is Krysta's layered question.

Boxer puts his arm around her, because he can't look her in the eyes, and he says, "After I dropped you off at O'Brien's, it was getting dark, and I

saw what I thought was a firefly, so I approached it. When I looked inside the firefly, I saw that it was growing, and there was a watery center in the middle of its body.”

“It was a rift, like what you entered on the roller coaster,” Krysta says, because she's clairvoyant, and a good listener.

“Exactly.”

“And the last time you were on the roller coaster, you were still high on Liquid Karma,” Krysta says, because she's studying the world so she can replicate it in her screenplay.

“Exactly,” Boxer says again.

“And the only way you were pulled out of the rift was when the Indian shot you with an arrow,” Krysta recalls.

Boxer nods his hood, then admits, “It's speculation that the action of the Indian closed the rift.”

“Of course it did,” Krysta responds, “What else would have closed it?”

“Your touch,” Boxer says.

Krysta puts her sunglasses back on, then she asks, “So, what happened last night?”

“I did the Liquid Karma, then fell into the rift,” Boxer says carefully.

“*Into* the rift?” Krysta repeats, because she saw Boxer on the sand.

“I believed what you told me about quitting getting DP'd, you know that right?” Boxer asks.

“Of course, babe. I know, that you know, in your heart of hearts, that if anything it's going to be penetrating both my holes at the same time, it's going to be your fingers- three in the pink, two in the stink.”

“Thank you for saying that,” Boxer responds, then tells her, “So please believe me... when I tell you... I did that Liquid Karma and I bled through time. I was transported to the 1920's- if I had to guess, it was 1926's Santa Monica beach, and there were these black umbrellas everywhere.”

We try to muffle our gasp. This was the asynchronous picture that brought us to the Santa Monica beach in the first place, and somehow, Boxer Santaros stepped *into* the picture.

“The rift, for the second time, had taken me to another point in America's history,” Boxer explains without passion, “It was similar, but foreign; it was here, but elsewhere. Sure, the people were dressed differently, but they *looked* the same, do you understand?”

“I understand,” Krysta says, leaning on Boxer's big shoulder.

“At first, I didn't know if I could interact with the world I had entered. With the Native American rift, I was bound to the roller coaster cart. This time, I could walk around, and the world was open to my touch. I walked up to a man in a three-piece suit, and I asked him the time, because I was afraid to ask him the date, and he said that it was four in the afternoon. When I fell into the rift, it wasn't four in the afternoon- it was later. For some reason, I thought I would be moved to the exact same time, just eighty years earlier, but that wasn't the case, and in confirming this, I began to feel fear about what else I had miscalculated. I have to admit, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to leave, and even though I had been given a chance to see something that few, besides the very, very old had experienced, I didn't want to take advantage of that chance. I was in this incredible world, but it was a place I wanted to share with you.”

Krysta rubs Boxer's massive bicep through his hoodie, and she asks, “Was the amusement park built by then?”

“It was,” Boxer says, his hood still covering his face, but the excitement in his voice is unmistakable. He continues, “I was drawn to it, because- I'm not sure if this is why you brought it up- but I thought that, when I got on the roller coaster there, maybe I could travel through the rift again, like I did with the Native American bleed. So I tried not to stand out as I waited in line for the coaster, then I used the coins in my pocket to buy a ride. I was sure that the tracks would link up- that I would start in 1920's Santa Monica, and I'd travel back to you, so I got in the cart, in the very front seat, and I rode the entire coaster, but the background didn't slide away. The entire time, I was there, present, as the beach in the 20's remained all around me. When the cart clacked to a halt, I got off, because I had to, because there were other people waiting to get on and escape for a couple moments.”

“What did you do after that?” Krysta asks, because she doesn't have the ability to see what he did.

“I found someone from present-day Santa Monica,” Boxer reveals.

“Who?” Krysta asks, excited.

“It was... Inga von Westphalen.”

“She had traveled through the rift too?” Krysta asks, transfixed by Boxer, who shakes his hood back and forth.

“No?”

“She was 15.”

"The math on that... is... that would make her..." Krysta trails off, trying to buy time until Boxer provides the answer, but all Boxer offers is, "Old. It would make her old as fuck now."

"And she's old as fuck in the present," Krysta says, syncing everything up, then asks, "If she was 15, how did you know it was her?"

"I spoke with her on the phone in your hotel room in Vegas," Boxer admits.

"And what did she say to you?" Krysta asks, then seems to wince.

"At the hotel, or in the 20's?"

"In the 20's," Krysta responds, steering him to safety.

"At first, I didn't know it was her. She was sitting on the end of the pier, and I walked to the edge, so I was next to her, and I thought- okay, this is stupid- but I thought that her touch could pull me out of the rift like you did on the roller coaster, so I begin to lose my balance- my arms flailed, and I tightroped on the edge of the pier, and even though she was just this little girl, she reached out to me, and she pulled my hoodie forward so that I fell safely onto the wooden boards, instead of into the ocean. I was on my knees, and as I raised my splintered palms, she knelt down beside me, and she held my pierced hand in her own, and this didn't close the rift, but we remained united- my hand in hers- while we looked into each other's eyes, and she saw the future, while I saw the past. We found transcendence in each other's presence. In this illogical bond, we scooted to the edge of the boards, and we hanged our legs off the end of the pier... then we looked out at the ocean together."

"A young Inga looked out at the ocean like it was a cash crop she had to wait to harvest," Krysta realizes.

"She looked over at me, and said, 'The Pacific Ocean is God's least-celebrated miracle.' Her heavy German accent was unmistakable- I recognized it immediately, and when I nodded, she added, 'Even a massive and powerful man such as yourself must look in wide-eyed fear at the ocean below us.'"

"How'd you respond?" Krysta whispers.

"I said, 'I wonder what would happen if a weak man gained the ocean's power,' and Inga decided, 'He would no longer be a weak man. He would control the world.'"

Krysta holds Boxer tight, and asks, "Do you think..."

"That Inga created the Tidal Generator because her only son was a lisping runt entering the world completely powerless and not in control of his future?" Boxer asks.

"Yes?"

"In many ways... yes, I do," Boxer confirms.

"Wait, you said that you paid to get on the roller coaster," Krysta says, circling back.

"Sure."

"And that coin is going to have 2007 or whatever year it was minted on it."

"So?"

"So what if someone sees that coin? It will be like that urban legend where they emptied the pockets of that guy who assassinated someone important- like a county comptroller or something- and they found the assassin was carrying a coin with a date from ten years in the future."

"I'm not familiar with the story. After they empty his pockets, and find the coin, then what happens?" Boxer asks.

"I don't know, I told you the important part though."

"I think the question you have to ask yourself is, *Did that change the world?*" Boxer responds.

"I don't know, we have no way of knowing."

"You referred to it as an urban legend," Boxer points out.

"I guess what I'm asking you is, when you go through this rift and have interactions and conversations with people, do you believe the future has changed?"

"The future is always changing," Boxer says.

"Oh, right, I meant the present," Krysta responds, almost making herself go cross-eyed.

"The present is exactly as it should be," Boxer tells her.

"What happened next with the girl from the 20's?" Krysta asks, and there's a tiny amount of fear and jealousy in this question. If she was worried about the world she would've asked, "What happened next with Inga?" but she didn't, because the porn star is used to being replaced by younger girls.

"I started thinking about what Inga said- about the power of the ocean, and I decided that would be how I'd allow my karmic debt to be paid, by letting the ocean claim me," Boxer says.

"What debt do you have to the ocean?" Krysta asks.

"The fact that I've been complacent in the destruction of it," Boxer points out.

"It was claiming lives even before the Tidal Generators, so I don't see a debt," Krysta assures him.

"Not at the same scale though."

"So how did you even your karmic debt?"

"I stood up, and Inga stood up, and we looked down the pier, toward the beach, then I held my arms cruciform... and fell backward into the water."

"And that's how you closed the rift?" Krysta asks, fearing the impact.

"No. I hit the water, then I came up for air. I looked back to the beach, to the 1920's, and this inspired me to swim further out, away from the shore. I kept swimming and swimming, but I wasn't getting tired and I wasn't gulping water in my lungs."

"So how'd it end?" Krysta asks.

Boxer shakes his hood, then says, "I felt my memories fade."

"What do you mean?"

"As I was swimming, I was willing to do anything it would take to get back to you, but I had trouble remembering if I knew you before Vegas. I remembered your dance, but I had trouble recalling how I met Fortunio. So I started to panic."

"Your memory was being wiped as you stayed in the past," Krysta realizes.

We turn to Pilot, and say, "This could mean that Boxer has traveled through the rift once before and stayed in too long."

Pilot points to the screen, not engaging in the conversation, because information is still being provided.

"That's not even the weirdest part," Boxer says, then reveals, "When I didn't get tired of swimming, I decided that I was going to just let myself sink. I would fight my instincts, and relent to the power of the ocean. So... I submerged myself, and as I got lower in the water, I saw a bright glow. It was the glow of the Liquid Karma being piped into the Tidal Generator," Boxer says.

"You submerged and came out in our time?" Krysta asks, skeptical, because Boxer is totally dry.



"That's what I thought would happen, so I came up for air, then I looked back at the Santa Monica pier in the 1920's."

"What? Boxer, I don't get it," Krysta asks, her face a mask of confusion.

"I looked to where the Tidal Generator should have been, and... I saw a rift. It was a rift, high in the sky, and I began swimming to it, my eyes fixed on it as my only hope to return to you."

"But how would you get into the rift?" Krysta asks.

"Before I could figure that out, a commercial airliner, missing an engine, burst out of the rift, then traveled toward the beach... and it smashed into the roller coaster," Boxer says.

Instead of Krysta being skeptical of this, she immediately says, "The rift needs to be closed, or the dimensions will continue to intermingle. There is another dimension that this rift is providing a rabbit hole into, and if we leave it open, it will be Dimension War I."

Suddenly the scope of chaos widens, as our purpose becomes more refined.

"I want you to know... I wasn't able to leave the rift, without entering another rift, until you touched me," Boxer tells Krysta, and at this moment we realize that the cab has stopped.

Krysta takes out a hundred dollar bill from her bra, then hands it to the driver.

"This is the answer," we say.

*"Is it?"*

"We need to send Boxer into the rift."

*"That won't close it."*

"It did all the other times," we point out.

*"No. Boxer entered the rift, then his body was preserved in a coma-like state in present time, until someone touched him, and he woke up."*

"So let's have Boxer bleed through time, then when he enters the rift, we have Krysta touch his body," we say, changing sure-thing strategies on the fly.

*"We never see what happens to Boxer in the rift. We don't find out anything about his experience until he relays it on his return."*

"What closed the rift at Lake Mead?" we ask, thinking we have Pilot trapped.

*"A karmic debt being paid. You heard Boxer discuss it."*

"Who paid the debt?"

*"The Whopper."*

"What created the debt?"

*"Our past actions in the desert."*

"What did we do in the desert?"

*"Personally, I've killed five people there."*

We don't fight Pilot on this because we can't deny what he did, and we can't deny that he was in a desert, and we can't deny that killing people—even in a time of war—strikes us as provoking a nearly unpayable karmic debt.

We choose to pay attention to the feed, as it hops to Teena MacArthur's command center.

With a board of buttons as a background, Simon Theory abruptly motors his chair over to Teena, then quickly slams it to a stop, and if it wasn't for his weight, the momentum would've launched him out of his chair and onto the floor.

Simon declares enthusiastically, "Teena, I've begun looking for seals."

Not playing ball, Teena responds, "The Tidal Generator scares them away."

"Ah, I receive such bitter enjoyment from your smart ass comments," Simon muses.

"It's all to bring you joy," Teena responds dryly.

"I'm referring to the seals that must be broken to bring about the apocalypse," Simon continues, and this gets Teena's attention. The apocalypse classifies as a national security issue, and national security is Teena's bag.

"Are you of the belief that the seals might be broken here, in Santa Monica?" Teena asks carefully, giving Simon the option to be like, "Nah," and if he chooses this road, she could immediately drop the topic.

"Most beachgoers seem to be consciously not breaking the seal, because otherwise, they have to piss in the ocean," Simon says, then Teena, totally serious, asks, "Is that what it's like to be on the receiving end of my smart ass remarks? Touché, Simon, you have confirmed to me that I need to do some deep and aggressive soul searching."

"Your soul won't have worth if the seals for the apocalypse are being broken," Simon reminds her.

“Okay, walk me through it. Which current events do you interpret as being broken seals?” Teena asks.

“The lamb opens the first seal.”

“A lamb opened a seal? With its hooves?” Teena asks, as a woman who clearly doesn't dip into the Bible on Sundays.

“If you're going to get super literal with this, the sheep has seven eyes, so I mean-”

“-alright, so it was a sheep born in Long Beach.”

Simon doesn't laugh at Teena's pollution joke, and says, “Anyway, when the first seal is opened, there's a great thunder. Do you recall the thunder last week?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Yeah, and it never rains here.”

“Coincidence. I need more,” Teena declares.

“Okay, how about the fact that when the second seal is broken, a dude with a big ass sword shows up and says that everyone is going to have to start killing each other, and whatnot.”

“I'll keep a lookout for Conan-”

“-alright. Dig this,” Simon says, and he seems proud of this next one, “This third seal is metal, it's all, *'And lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a denarius, and three measures of barley for a denarius; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.'*”

“But we got rid of the oil, and have maxed out on the whine with the rise of Neo-Marxism in the Southland?” Teena asks.

“It's about inflation and famine. Think about it, now more than ever there is a tale of two cities in LA. There's a tipping of the scales,” Simon points out.

“Bor-ing,” Teena declares, and it makes her seem younger.

“Sixth seal,” Simon skips forward abruptly, “*And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake.'*”

“Oh, come on,” Teena responds.

Simon keeps moving down his list, “*And the kings of the Earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall*

*on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"* Simon reads, then waits for a reaction. When he doesn't get anything in response, he asks Teena, "Ya ever wonder why the fuck the infinitely wealthy folks who discovered Liquid Karma decided to build a mega-zeppelin?"

Teena is silent for a moment and we can see the pieces locking together in her head. She finally declares, "Now that one has legs, Dungeon Master."

"Low blow," Simon sighs.

"Literally," Teena counters, and for the first time, we see a non-high general Teena MacArthur smile at someone.

"What the fuck," we say, looking to Pilot. The information we just received holds weight. "What if the great men and the rich men take to the sky in the mega-zeppelin?" we ask.

Pilot nods.

*"I've thought about blowing up the warehouse where the mega-zeppelin is."*

"Should you really be admitting that knowing that the sight on your rifle can record anything and we both have phones in our pocket?"

*"That's why I haven't done it. Because I've said it aloud before, and I know that they'll probably be dispatching UPU3 out to the warehouse anytime my Firebird comes within five minutes of the mega-zeppelin."*

We look back to the laptop, finally understanding The Book of Revelation, but instead of remaining with Simon, we're now looking at a shirtless Boxer, in his bedroom in Fortunio's house. Boxer turns away from the camera, and we finally get a look at the tattoos he received in the barn when Serpentine and Jimmy Hermosa gave him the "armor of God," which will allegedly reveal the one true religion. The mosaic includes the Star of David around Boxer's bellybutton, and the face of Christ on the center of his back, then there's some Buddhist stuff on his chest.

Krysta is in the room with Boxer. She's on the bed, smoking, watching a movie that we can't see because the camera in the TV is capturing everything. The sound is turned up too high, and the noises are bizarre- we hear horns blaring, brakes screeching, and a woman panicking. There's stressed, rhythmic, heavy breathing that makes us wonder if, as we watch her, Krysta is watching herself as well.

Boxer walks over to Krysta and she drops her cigarette into the glass of either water or vodka next to her.

Boxer climbs onto the bed, and relaxes beside Krysta, but he doesn't say anything because his actions speak for him. Krysta slides away, countering this wordless sexual advance of Boxer's shirtless body pressing against her, and she says, "I'd like to ride your dick like a pogo stick- I really would- but I have a meeting with Cyndi."

"You aren't up for it? Is this because I puked on your tits?" Boxer asks, clearly concerned.

"No. Don't worry about that. No one has puked on my tits more than yours truly so you're in good company. The reason why I don't want to do it is that you have pretty good stamina, and I can't be late for this meeting. Cyndi Pinziki is the consultant who's working to get my show out of just the target markets, and into a nationwide expansion."

It's become second nature for Krysta to explain exactly who people are to Boxer, and we appreciate this kind gesture from a woman that the media had led us to believe is only concerned with herself and her brand. We've been able to see Krysta take care of business, *then* go to her business meeting.

"Can I come with you?" is Boxer's puppy-dog response.

"No, babe. I want you to relax here. You had a big night last night. It's important that you aren't overstimulated. We need to lessen the number of roller coaster nights you have."

Krysta gets off the bed, and walks over to the closet. She takes out a pure white cotton ball of a jacket that never should have been brought to the state of California for any reason, and the reason why it's in Fortunio's house likely means it's a porno costume. She puts the jacket on, poses in the mirror for a little while, then before leaving, she walks over to the bed and kisses Boxer on his forehead, leaving a mark of red lipstick, and this is the one marking on Boxer's body that we know for sure he feels protected by.

The feed clicks through the security cameras in Fortunio's house as Krysta exits the bedroom, walks through a daylight-drenched living room, then she carefully navigates downstairs in her heels, and leaves the beach house.

Instead of cutting to something more important, we follow Krysta on her way to her meeting, hopping from numerous different cameras, which makes us feel terror and safety from terror in equal measure.

“So is she really going to meet this Cyndi lady or is she going to the Neo-Marxist place?”

*“Does Krysta Now look like a Neo-Marxist?”*

“No. She has a slammin' hips-to-waist ratio,” we say, our fears calmed, but just to be sure, we ask, “And Cyndi isn't a Neo-Marxist, right?”

Pilot smiles wide at this question.

“Come on, there's no such thing as spoilers for this.”

*“Among other responsibilities, Cyndi Pinziki holds some sort of non-specific development position at CTV, which is the network who is funding and airing Krysta's talk show in target markets.”*

“How do they decide which markets to air the show in?”

*“They look at the regional DVD sales from her last movie to make the decision.”*

“What was her last movie?”

*“It was called, 'Aggressively Fuck My Pussy, You Lazy Faggot.’”*

“That seems like it's both exclusively marketed to male Neo-Marxists, and is also something they'd be completely outraged about.”

*“I know. It really was genius branding.”*

“A real conversation starter,” we say.

Eventually, Krysta arrives at what has to be the same sidewalk cafe she met Sheena at when she first revealed she was dating Boxer. Passing tables of awestruck men and judgy girls, Krysta locates a woman sitting alone, then sits down at a small two person table opposite her. Assuming this is Cyndi Pinziki, she's a forty-year-old white lady who's unremarkable in most, if not all, regards.

We have audio on the feed, and it's so clear that we immediately assume that Ms. Pinziki is wearing a recording device of some kind. Cyndi makes no admission of this, and promptly assures Krysta that she looks great, and that her new smaller tits are “super tasteful, like the little black dress of bolt-ons.” Cyndi's voice has a Midwestern gee-golly nature that doesn't jive with Krysta's wolf-in-sheep's-clothing demeanor.

“Ugh, I love you. You’re not as awful as your reputation would indicate,” Krysta responds, in what might be an attempt at a return-compliment.

Obviously experienced in this type of rude assessment, Cyndi simply moves past it, and says, “The network is really happy with the early numbers on the show, but they’ve brought me in just to... streamline things.” Cyndi reaches into her massive purse that sits on the table, then takes out a three-ring binder full of documents. She opens the binder, then flips through it until she finds the page she’s looking for, “The audience reaction to the show was a little polarized. Some people loved it, then others, like this lady, said, and I quote, ‘This show is mostly just cunts talking over each other, as though each of their invalid points has an expiration date of two seconds in the future.’”

“See, people *are* getting what I’m doing here,” Krysta says, not taking issue with this brash description.

“Rightttt,” Cyndi responds, clearly disappointed that Krysta didn’t immediately launch into a defense of what the show is *really* about. “Maybe if you let me know a bit more about you, I’ll be able to zero in regarding where we want to focus on for enhancing the show’s profile.”

“Okay... well... in my first six movies I was just ‘Krysta,’ but then in order to differentiate myself from the 76 other Krystas in the business, I added the ‘Now.’”

“Wow,” Cyndi says.

“Wow? More like, *Now*. It’s all about now- 2008- not next week, not tomorrow. If you want to fuck me, you can fuck me... now,” Krysta says. Reaching into her bra, Krysta removes a pure white business card, then slides it across the table to Cyndi.

Picking up the card, again Cyndi says, “Wow,” then she quickly turns to the next page in her binder, noting, “I see that’s also the name we went with for the TV show... Now...”

Krysta nods.

“And you say that you’re a pop star?”

Krysta nods.

“The theme song to your show-”

“-yup, that’s me singing.”

“I bring this up... because... have you read the lyrics, dear?” Cyndi asks carefully.

"Of course I read the lyrics, I wrote them... with Jimmy, and Max, and Max II, and the weird Dutch person that was there, and there was this cute little dog who was like—"

"—I'm just going to read them to you," Cyndi says, then she pulls open the rings of her binder and removes a sheet of paper. She holds it away from her face a bit, then squints at the words, saying, "The theme song to your daytime talk show is:

*Shape without form  
Shade without color  
Paralyzed force  
Gesture without motion  
We are the hollow women  
The stuffed women  
Violent souls; tortured spirits  
Our dried voices  
When whispered together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Remember us, for it is a new day  
A new dawn, the time is now  
I'm Krysta. Krysta Now."*

"Beautiful," Krysta swoons.

Cyndi nods repeatedly, trying to find the beauty in the lyrics by skimming them again. Ultimately, she doesn't seem to find what she's looking for, so she asks, "That didn't sound a little..."

"... Midwestern? I mean, that's *your* gross accent so how is that my fault?" Krysta asks.

"Not just that... it's... very busy in its topics... a woman gets... stuffed?" Cyndi mumbles, trailing off.

"Yes, because this is a topical-discussion-chat-reality show stuffed with psycho-sexual enrichment," Krysta reminds Cyndi.

"It unquestionably is," Cyndi responds, then adds, "I think our format is... also a little... busy."

"I'm a busy woman," Krysta says.



"I've seen. Sometimes you have upwards of five cocks to pleasure at one time, it's like some sort of triple-X plate-spinning act," Cyndi responds, then winces, and says, "Sorry," because her actual opinion leaked out.

"Ew, did you just fart?" Krysta asks, not understanding why Cyndi is being apologetic.

Cyndi closes her eyes tightly, and Krysta warmly notes, "Don't be embarrassed. A major plot point in my screenplay is about farting so-

"-please have mercy on me," Cyndi begs, her hands bound together in prayer.

"Okay, mercy granted," Krysta says warmly.

After being issued a pardon for her phantom-fart, Cyndi says, "My poorly articulated point is that we need some specialization."

"Specialization is for nerds. I don't do specialization."

"What *do* you do?" Cyndi asks.

"It all. I do... it all," Krysta declares, not asking for permission.

"Like, such as?"

"Like, such as- the pop album, the jewelry, the clothing and perfume lines, the energy drink..."

Cyndi begins flipping pages in her binder, while mumbling, "That is... a very ambitious business plan."

"I have The Power."

"You seem to. You're glowing. What's your secret?" Cyndi responds, half-sarcastically, and suddenly we feel like Pilot didn't respond to the question about Cyndi being a Neo-Marxist because she actually *is* one, and she's gotten word via Fortunio that Krysta is in possession of Boxer. This line of questioning is begging for Krysta to confirm Fortunio's leak.

"It's because..." Krysta looks around the sidewalk cafe, and when she suspects that no one is paying attention to her for a short moment, she asks, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Of course."

"I'm fucking a very large and important man," Krysta declares.

"Wow," Cyndi says again, but this time it seems genuine and not a desperate attempt to merely provide a response to a statement she's unwilling to allow her brain to process for fear it will remain in her long-term memory.

"I found him at the exact moment I needed him, and I know, in my heart, that he's going to save us."

“He's going to save your struggling perfume line?” Cyndi asks, not following.

“No. That's beyond saving. I've seen the numbers. I could piss in a bottle and sell double what the perfume line does-”

“-please don't make me put a business plan together for that venture-”

“-I was referring to him saving the world.”

“As in... this world?” Cyndi asks delicately.

“Yes. This world,” Krysta confirms, but rocks back and forth in her chair, then says, “We certainly have to close the rift because I don't want him saving Earth 2.”

“Wait, this world is the Earth,” Cyndi says, not following.

“Right, this is Earth 1, what I don't want is him saving Earth 2... too. He might fuck a German teenager if that happens.”

Cyndi admits, genuinely, “I worry about you.”

“I worry about you as well,” Krysta responds kindly.

Getting back to business, Cyndi writes a couple sentences on a page in her binder, then pitches, “Do you think that you can get this large and powerful man on your show, to save the world, for maybe a one-parter... or... a two-parter?”

“Yes,” Krysta says definitively.

“Saving the world, not tomorrow, but NOW. Tomorrow, on Now,” Cyndi says, imagining the commercial they could run.

“No, it won't be now. It will probably be the 4<sup>th</sup>,” Krysta states, as though this was the final word- the end of the meeting- the ultimate goal that they're moving toward, so she gets up from the table, then we don't even get to watch Krysta's tight little ass leave, because the feed abruptly switches to Zora, and we see her in a familiar place. We've been to this place before, and identifying Zora's surroundings narrows the location possibilities significantly. The feed is obviously from a Fluid Karma enabled TV, and when we see her pass by a massive Bud Light advertisement, we're able to place her at The Poop Deck. Of course she'd make this trip. We saw that Neo-Marxist dropbox in the bathroom, and it makes sense that someone eventually has to collect the USB drives and documents that people drop off there. They can't let them sit in the drop box too long because it's near-certain that guys often misinterpret the drop box to be a glory hole, and there's probably cum on *everything* in that box.

Zora passes the men's room, as well as the women's room, and after she scans the sparse crowd at the bar, she disappears from the frame, and we're left staring at an unpopulated part of the bar

"Let's go there for lunch," we say.

*"You can go, I'm gonna stick around here."*

"Right now the feed is showing us a static camera shot of a portion of The Poop Deck."

*"It could change at any point."*

"It's a mobile laptop."

*"It's getting more dangerous out there."*

Pilot points out to the beach, and we see no less than three fights in progress.

"Aren't you supposed to stop that?" we ask.

*"You're right."*

Pilot leans toward his rifle, and looks into the sight, and before he can shoot someone, we say, "Hey, look, you were right. Here's Zora, and her purse looks full."

Pilot leans back, taking his eye away from the scope, and he looks to the screen.

*"So what will it be- lunch at The Poop Deck, crowd control, or diligently watching the laptop screen?"*

We weigh the three options, then decide, "Laptop screen."

Once again, the feed flips back to the house in Hermosa Beach, and this time, it's focusing on Fortunio, who's lying in his bed. He gets a call on his cell and answers it, balancing a Bud Light on his stomach.

"Tomorrow is when we shoot, not today. Now is not the time. Don't send the guy here!" DREAM immediately screams over the line.

Fortunio looks confused, and he asks, "Wait, is this Shoshana? Are you on your period? Just stick a makeup sponge up there, then get to fucking."

"One- gross, two- my voice is super famous, three- is that really what they do when a girl is on her period and has to shoot porn, four- porn is rape culture, five- don't judge what a woman does with her body, six-"

"-hi, DREAM," Fortunio sighs.

"Hi, interrupting male," DREAM responds.

"Are you unclear regarding the fact that *you* called me, and I would never have initiated this conversation in a million years?" Fortunio asks, trying to reestablish a baseline.

"Are you unclear that... uh... fuck you?" DREAM responds like a vulgar child.

"You were calling me because..."

"Because we can't do the ride-along today," DREAM says.

"Okay," Fortunio responds, then takes a sip of his beer.

"Aren't you going to ask me why?"

"Nope."

"Please ask me why," DREAM requests.

"Why?"

"Wait, was that you questioning why you should ask, or is that you asking why we aren't doing the ride-along today?" Dream asks.

"That question was actually directed toward God, and it was me asking him why I have to carry the burden of your acquaintanceship," Fortunio clarifies.

"Hey, asshole. I'm doing you a favor," DREAM spits over the line.

"Oh, you're going to hang up?" Fortunio questions.

"You can't get rid of me that fast, Combo-dick."

"Combo-dick?" Fortunio asks, interested for the first time.

"Combo-dick, as in the snack, Combos. You know, those stubby pretzels filled with gross salty cheese," DREAM explains.

"Whoa, insult my dick all you want, but don't be so reductive about Combos," Fortunio requests, then places his beer back on his stomach-table.

"We're going to do the ride-along tomorrow because we still have some makeup tests to do today," DREAM explains.

"Makeup tests?" Fortunio asks.

DREAM seems to think better of letting Fortunio in on the plan, and she tries to play it off by saying, "Yup, make sure the makeup is... tested... for... a face.. or... faces."

Fortunio looks like he's about to respond, but he furrows his brow, then pulls the phone away from his ear, and presses a button to end the call.

The feed switches to a POV camera that is following Vaughn Smallhouse, and another man. The cameraman steps into what appears to be an elevator, then we hear Bobby Frost's voice say, "Okay, they're on honey," then he turns to Vaughn, and mumbles, "Nana is still making me wear these fucking things. Do I look like a nerd?"

"No," Vaughn assures him.

As the elevator doors open, an electronic greeting plays, "Welcome to Treer Plaza, Tower One, thirty-third floor," then Vaughn and Bobby step out of the elevator.

In Bobby's POV, we make our way through a lobby, then into a conference room that has so many mega-zeppelin schematics posted everywhere that they might as well be wallpaper.

We hear Nana Mae's voice, and we realize this is audio from Bobby's phone call, and he must have a Bluetooth jawbone in his ear. Nana Mae says, "We know that Boxer crossed the border into California. There hasn't been a single fingerprint found in the system since then. Someone has intercepted him and he's now being hidden."

"What the hell was he doing in Nevada?" Bobby asks.

"We still think he was kidnapped at that charity scavenger hunt that Vaughn forced him to go to for Treer Industries. On the same day, two of the prototype Treer SUVs were stolen from a warehouse in San Pedro and we believe this is one of the vehicles that transported Boxer. Tracking devices tell us that they crossed the border way out past Lake Mead. Set up your laptop. I can show you."

"All right," Bobby says, and the POV camera swings, blurry, almost choppy, as Bobby must be grabbing his computer.

The man who was in the elevator with Vaughn and Bobby didn't follow them out- it's just Senator Frost and his closest adviser at the conference room table.

Bobby's laptop boots, and he opens a secure-client e-mail program we've never seen before.

"Navigate to the attachments I sent you," we hear Nana Mae say, and we watch as Bobby begins opening a series of .JPEGS.

The first picture is of the desert and what looks like a dust devil in the center of the frame.

"What's this? Smoke?" Bobby asks, the camera moving closer as he takes a more detailed look

"That is what happened to the SUV that was stolen," Nana Mae responds.

"Why would they bring Boxer out into the middle of the desert?" Vaughn asks.

"That information... was lost to the sandstorm," Nana Mae mentions, blaming the weather for her failures, like a bad driver on slick pavement.

"Doesn't that strike you as convenient?" Vaughn asks.

"I don't know what you're alleging, Smallhouse. That the Neo-Marxists have... what... paid off mother nature to collude with them?" Nana Mae snips back.

Bobby shakes his head, jostling the frame, while Vaughn says, "I'm going to go back to being an agent. I could always find Boxer when I was managing him-"

"-I'll keep watching the cameras, you keep campaigning," Nana Mae interrupts Vaughn, giving him an order, and that's when the call ends, and the feed flips to a corner camera in the conference room, as Bobby removes his glasses, then tosses them on the table. We have to wonder why Nana Mae needed to see exactly what Bobby saw- is the trust level between these two really that low? If Nana Mae doesn't believe her husband, how could we expect her to trust in the populous? Do we really need Nana Mae going on a ride-along with us for every moment of our life?

Cutting from the glasses to the room-monitoring camera is pointless because after watching an exasperated Bobby for a moment, the feed switches back to the Hermosa Beach house- revealing footage of the man Nana Mae can't find, which means that she's not sending the footage to us, nor is she able to see what we see. This edit feels deliberate- like whoever is directing this lifeumentary knows something is about to happen with Boxer, and he or she is cutting in to make sure we possess a keen understanding of what we're up against.

Right now, Boxer is alone, reading *The Power*, but we're looking at him from a new angle, and we can see the TV in the frame, which confuses us, and we have to ask, "Who's filming this?"

*"It's almost like it's being filmed from a camera set up on a tripod at the side of the bed..."*

"Oh, no. There are multiple Boxer Santaros sex tapes," we realize, understanding that the same camera which will be used for the ride-along was filming Krysta's ride on top last night.

*"Face it, dude, there's a sex tape of everyone at this point. Nana Mae Frost is the new Hustler, and Hustler is folding into Lockheed."*

We choose to watch the feed, because we don't want to think about the fact that videos of our various minorly-embarrassing sexual adventures

could be out there, or worse, what if there's video of us masturbating in that lonely, frantic, filling-the-emptiness way we sometimes experience.

To distract ourselves from this terror, we watch as Krysta walks into the bedroom she shares with Boxer, then takes off her white coat, and asks, "Have you been a good boy while I was gone?"

"I've been working on *The Power*," Boxer says, lifting up a copy of the screenplay that's now covered in scribbled edits.

"Did we go on the internet?" Krysta asks, her hands at the bottom of her shirt- her movement temporarily paused.

Boxer shakes his head no, his eyes never leaving Krysta's body.

"Promise?"

"Promise," Boxer responds, then Krysta pulls off her shirt, revealing a blue lace bra.

"Did we watch TV?" Krysta asks, her fingers finding the belt loops on her daisy dukes.

Boxer shakes his head no, and a smile slides across his face.

"Promise?"

"Promise," Boxer responds, then Krysta pulls down her shorts, revealing her blue lace panties.

"Do you want a surprise?" Krysta asks, climbing onto the bed.

Boxer nods, and Krysta lies next to him, then reaches down and... grabs the channel changer.

She turns on the TV, then the DVD player.

"This is my surprise?" Boxer asks, not exactly pleased.

"We're going to watch your favorite movie, *Kiss Me Deadly*," Krysta says, then adds, "I think it's based on the Lita Ford song," as though this incorrect bit of trivia could be a selling point. The timelines simply don't match up for this to be true, but maybe, on Earth 2, after a fucking airliner slammed into a roller coaster, Lita Ford does inspire noir.

On the screen within the screen, the Metro Goldwyn Mayer lion roars, then we see bare feet running down the middle of the road. Over the audio is a different type of heavy breathing than we expected, and we see a woman in a trench coat, arms flailing, as she flees from an unseen aggressor. A car passes her and its headlights illuminate the desperation on the woman's face as she watches a chance at salvation blow by. She waves manically at the next car, but it too passes. When she sees the headlights of

yet another approaching vehicle, she stands in the road, holding her hands out cruciform, then she closes her eyes.

The car- a convertible- swerves, brakes screeching, before it comes to rest in a cloud of dust on the shoulder.

Her arms still raised, the damsel in distress looks to the driver- a man, about forty-years-old- who's glaring back at her, not smiling. He twists the key in his two-seater convertible, but the engine won't turn over.

The out of breath woman approaches the driver because, at worst, at least she won't be all alone on this road.

"You almost wrecked my car!" is the warm welcome the driver gives her, but when he reads the concern on her face, he softens his demeanor, and says, "Well... get in." This guy is annoyed, but he also seems to understand that, yes, it is his responsibility to help her, and maybe the fact she had to throw herself at him, forcing him to stop, is a message regarding the carelessness he's been careening through the world with.

The woman enters the car, and as she pants in exhausted panic, it's a different woman's smooth voice cooing from the radio, "And now fellas, we'll hear that fine new platter by Nat King Cole, 'Rather Have the Blues.'"

The convertible is running again, and as it pulls back onto the road, the song begins to play.

The distraught woman, and the put-upon man, drive together, as the credits fall from the top of the frame- the letters capitalized and white.

"Deadly Kiss Me?" Boxer asks, and Krysta presses pause on the remote, then says, "No, look at the quotation marks."

The screen reads:

DEADLY"

"KISS ME

"Kiss. Me. Deadly," Krysta says, her finger pointing to the order of the words, then Boxer, taking this as a command, kisses her passionately.

Krysta closes her eyes and savors the moment, then when the kiss ends, she says, "That didn't feel so deadly."

"It should," Boxer responds.

"Why?" Krysta asks, confused.

Boxer raises his copy of *The Power*, and says, "Because I have to kill you in the script."

Krysta grabs the screenplay, then tosses it onto the floor.



“Right now, the only script you should be studying is this one,” she responds, then hits play again.

Boxer reads Ralph Meeker's name off the screen, then asks, “Is that the guy in the car?”

“He plays Mike Hammer, a hard-boiled private eye. You based the detective skills of Jericho Cane off Hammer. He's a cop who doesn't obey the rules.”

“Rules are for nerds,” Boxer says, and we know that he's saying this because the script says this.

“Fuck yeah,” Krysta agrees, as the woman on the TV cries, and Nat King Cole sings, and name-after-name-after-name pours down the screen like a rare LA rainstorm.

The credits end, and the convertible arrives at a police blockade.

The car in front of them is being searched, and we hear the cops state that a woman wearing a trench coat has escaped from the insane asylum.

Boxer laughs a non-laugh at this, then says, “Jericho Cane might be like Ralph in his detective skills, but Boxer Santaros is more the lady in the trench coat.”

“I'm the lady in the trench coat,” Krysta says to him.

“No. You aren't,” Boxer assures her.

“Do you want to know what happened... how I got my powers?” Krysta asks, and Boxer turns to focus on her, more interested in this story than in the story of his so-called favorite movie.

“Because, once you hear it, I will seem like that lady in the trench coat to you,” Krysta warns.

Boxer takes the remote, then pauses the movie as the woman in the trench coat- now passed the checkpoint because of Ralph Meeker's acceptance of their fake relationship- looks over at her savior. Her teeth are bared, and her eyes are wide- and she seems so afraid to disappoint a man she just met.

“I was in an aerospace anomaly...” Krysta begins her story, “...and, after it occurred, they took me off a plane, and I met this US Army General. His name was Simon Theory. He had this long white beard, and was wheelchair-bound because he was missing his legs. They had flown him there in an F-15. He sat across from me with a clipboard, and asked me questions.”

“What type of questions did he ask?”

"He asked me how it happened," Krysta says.

"How did it happen?"

After closing her eyes, and tapping her temple, Krysta says, "I was sitting on a cross-country flight, watching a rough cut of me having rough sex, so, like, even the final cut would be a rough cut, but just to clarify, I was not cut- I don't mix blood and sex," Krysta notices Boxer's perplexed expression, so she pulls back, "Sorry. Anyway, I was on the plane, just doing what people on planes do."

"Watching a video of yourself having extremely rough sex," Boxer says, without judgment, merely proving he's following the narrative.

"Right," Krysta confirms, "And all of the sudden, the entire cabin of the plane lit up with a flash."

"That's terrifying," Boxer empathizes.

"I saw a great light- a pure white glow- and it seemed to be... getting closer to me, but the weird thing was, instead of just my side of the plane lighting up, the entire cabin lit up, like we were... *inside* the light."

"How did it feel?" Boxer asks.

"Good, really warm, and soft- like a lullaby. It was such a striking feeling that I wanted to see how everyone else was interpreting the moment... and I saw that everyone was asleep... or passed out."

"But you remained conscious the entire time?"

"Yes... and so I was the only one to panic when the engine cut off."

"Did the plane start to drop into a free fall?" Boxer asks, and we can see, in his eyes, that he's flashing back to the pier in the 20's and seeing the plane, missing an engine, falling from the sky.

"No," Krysta shakes her head, then says, "It just kept going. Smooth as my pussy after a Brazilian. There was no turbulence at all."

"How did you know that the engine cut off?"

"Because it was totally silent," Krysta says.

"Did you try to get into the cockpit?" Boxer asks.

"I got up, and moved down the aisle, but the entire time my body was silhouetted by that white light. I called out, but no one responded. I figured that the pilot still had to be alive, so I went up to the cockpit, but when I opened the door... I found the crew asleep."

"How did you land the plane?" Boxer asks, scared for Krysta, despite the fact that he knows that she got out of this situation safely.

"I didn't. While we were hovering there, a voice spoke to me," Krysta says, almost distant.

"One of the passengers woke up?"

"No. The voice was muffled. It was... from outside the plane," Krysta responds.

"What did it say?"

"It demanded that I do something," Krysta responds.

"What did it ask you to do?"

"I was told to open the emergency exit."

"Did you recognize the voice?" Boxer asks, because it couldn't be that she opened the exit, right?

"Nope. I had never heard it before," Krysta says.

"Did you open the door?"

"Yup."

"And the plane depressurized?"

"Nope."

"What happened?" Boxer asks, forgoing science in favor of listening, and being there for his favorite girl in the world.

"There was no wind... no rush of air... just a calm stillness and an evermore blinding white light."

Presuming, Boxer begins to say, "You must have stayed in-"

"-I stepped outside of the plane, and my body began to float in the light," Krysta reveals, then she exhales, "There was a sea of clouds billowing beneath me. Then... something flew by me."

"What was it?"

"You're going to make fun of me," Krysta says, bashful.

"I won't," Boxer assures her. "You've never made fun of me, and I'll never make fun of you. We're going to stick together, and pay attention, no matter how ridiculous our stories seem. This is going to be like an improv skit between us, except it's not going to be completely and totally intolerable and devoid of pleasure."

"In that case... I will tell you that... I saw... a winged serpent... with seven heads," is what jumps out of Krysta's mouth, then she studies Boxer's face to see how he'll react. He doesn't smile at this, he doesn't raise an eyebrow at this, he just nods, agreeing with it, accepting it.

"I know it sounds insane, but that's what I saw. The heads bopped up and down in staggered jabs through the cloud-layer... examining me. Each head was whispering something in what could have been Latin."

"Did you feel threatened by the beast?" Boxer asks.

"No. As the creature's massive girth emerged fully from the white light, I saw that, on its back, was a girl sitting on a silver-plated saddle."

"Did you recognize her?"

"I did," Krysta admits. "She was my identical twin, except for the fact that her blonde hair was natural- I could see it flowing, and there were no lace front edges."

"Did you speak with her?" Boxer asks.

"At first... we just stared deep into each other's eyes... for a very long time, then she spoke to me. She said, 'My name is Muriel Fox.'"

"Like in our screenplay."

"Exactly. That's where I got the name for the character."

"And she imparted wisdom to you?"

"No. She accused me," Krysta responds meekly.

"Of what?"

"Ruining her life," Krysta reveals, enunciating each word.

"How did you ruin Muriel's life?"

"She said that she was supposed to work through me, and we were supposed to find Jericho Cane. She chastised me because instead of doing that- instead of finding that *one* special man- I was going from man-to-man, accomplishing nothing, seeking nothing, only awaiting release."

"There's more to you than that," Boxer assures Krysta.

"Now."

"Exactly, you're Krysta Now. You're a lifestyle brand," Boxer says, seeming brainwashed by love.

"Muriel told me... that I had to bring the chosen one to the great city where the kings are."

Boxer nods at this like he understands, but still asks, "What's that mean?"

"I didn't know, until I was driving by the Staples Center and saw a giant poster of a hockey player, and on his jersey was a crown. Turns out, he's on a hockey team called the LA Kings. It was all making sense, especially because Muriel instructed me to stay in the seven hills of the Southland, as it was soon to be rebuilt as the new Jerusalem."

"Then she flew away?" Boxer asks.

"No. Then she flew over to me, on that terrible beast."

"Was she attempting to take your place? Was she trying to get on that plane?" Boxer asks, looking at Krysta's lace front hairline.

"No."

"What was she doing then?"

"She held out her hand to me."

"Did you take it?"

"I was confused. I thought she was trying to pull me onto the beast," Krysta whispers.

"What was she really trying to do?"

"She was reaching out for help," Krysta responds, and this seems to hurt her. She touches her mouth with her fingertips, almost like she's trying to keep someone from reading her lips, then she says, "When I didn't reach out for her, the beast threw her off its back... and I watched Muriel plummet."

"I thought there was a light everywhere around you?"

"When she fell, she pierced the light, clearing the way, and my vision followed her- like a lensless zoom- so I saw the helpless look on her face as she dropped to the ground. When she hit... her impact caused these walls to spring up from the ground, into a maze. Or- *no*- the walls didn't spring up- portions of the ground fell away. It wasn't only where she landed though, an entire pattern traveled out from the center-point of her impact in the sand."

"Where did the beast go?" Boxer asks, like he's ready to become Jericho Cane, and slay it.

"It headed in the opposite direction as Muriel, soaring above me, and it pierced the light as well."

"And there you were in the middle."

"Getting double penetrated by mysticism," Krysta says, staring at the ceiling.

"How did this resolve? How are you here?" Boxer asks.

"I awoke, as if from a dream, and the white glow was gone, and everything was back to normal. A stewardess had her hand on my shoulder, and she said, 'You can wake up now.'"

"So it was all in your head?" Boxer asks.

"I thought so, until the captain came on the intercom and said that he had never experienced anything like what we had been through, and we were told that after the plane landed, we would be taken to Edwards Air Force base."

"Then you told this story to Simon?" Boxer asks.

"Among other things. He attached electrodes to my forehead and arms, and the wires ran to a device that resembled a polygraph machine. It was charting... something... something that was coming from me."

"It was just you and this Simon guy?" Boxer asks.

"Yup."

"Were you able to look at the paper from the polygraph machine?"

"Yes. Simon was marking it."

"What did he mark on there?"

"Letters."

"What letters?"

Krysta pauses, then says, "E A T R M A U R V E I N F K."

"FINK EAT RAM RUVE," Boxer says, almost instantly.

"What's that?" Krysta asks, sitting up.

"A cool ass punk band name," Boxer says, then makes the devil horns with his fingers.

Krysta smiles at Boxer's failure, then mentions, "I assembled it into FREAKMAN VIRTUE."

"Also a cool punk band name," Boxer says, then he stares at Krysta until she makes the devil horns with her fingers. They both laugh. After this moment of goofy connection, Krysta drops her hand, and asks, "What do you think it means?"

"I don't know," Boxer responds, not bullshitting her. "Why do you think this happened to you?"

"I believe that God gave me this gift," Krysta says, then shakes her head, like she's doubting her own theory now that she's heard it stated aloud. She admits, "The part I'm having real trouble with is the question of if this vision, or experience, or deviation, was all just to save me from how I was living? Was this all a drastic measure from God to get me to stop doing... the stuff I've been doing, and the only way He knew how to have that happen was to give me something else I could make money with?"

"That's why you wrote the screenplay?" Boxer asks, not feigning co-ownership of the first draft.

"Yeah. The story... just appeared to me. At first, I was embarrassed to put this stuff down- because of the absurdity of it all, but once I started writing it, Simon put me on speakerphone with some other people, and I thought they might be film agents or whatever, but they were all really supportive, so I finished it... and now... it's coming true."

Boxer takes Krysta's hand, and assures her, "What you're doing is important to all of us."

"That screenplay is all about saving the world, but most of the time... I only feel like I'm saving me," Krysta admits.

"I'd sacrifice my life to save you," Boxer tells Krysta, then adds, "In that screenplay, when I try to be the hero and I end up hurting you... I'm glad you wrote that part, because it's a warning, it's a hell-on-Earth scenario, and I'll do everything to stop it from coming true."

"Maybe it has to come true?" Krysta says, unsure.

We look to Pilot, and ask, "Do you believe her story?"

*"You know how, in that movie they were watching- when they showed up at the traffic stop, Ralph Meeker had every chance to point to his right, and say, 'She's who you're looking for,' then the cops would drag this problem of a woman out of his life, but before he could do that, she reached over and held his hand and that small amount of human touch bonded them together?"*

We don't answer this question because we feel it's not a question at all- it's an answer that we understand completely.

We focus on the laptop screen, despite the fact it's lunchtime. We'll keep watching, because time is of the essence.

Zora is now returning to the Neo-Marxist compound. After she climbs the exterior stairs, she scans her card, then climbs the interior stairs.

Surprisingly, she makes a detour and stops in a room that's been passed by every other time we've watched someone enter the compound.

From a security camera, we see that one wall of the room consists of massive computer monitors, and there are four guys at the monitors- the majority of them working on terminals that have black screens littered with green text in horizontal rows. We can see this because the camera is behind these men, and its existence is as much about watching the equipment as it is about watching the men at the equipment. Most of the screens feature the same basic interface, except for the screen in front of a big white guy

with gelled black hair. We can't see his face, but based on his frame alone, he doesn't look like he should be a Neo-Marxist- he looks like he has a gym membership and a girlfriend, something that the rest of the guys in this room certainly do not have.

On this guy's screen is what appears to be a zombie movie.

"Hey, Eli, whatcha watching?" Zora asks, gravitating to his anomaly.

"Some Deodato," Eli says, a slight Boston accent present in his voice.

"Oh, is he a Marxist philosopher?" Zora asks.

"Yeah," Eli responds, but he seems a little nervous.

Zora gets closer to him, then asks, "And what are some of his beliefs?"

"That everyone, no matter who you are, deserves to be eaten," Eli says, then nods his head once at this, like he nailed the response.

"Normally, I'd be mad at you for allowing yourself to become distracted from your responsibilities within the movement, but Mamma has got herself a new man, and I must say, it's nice to be eaten again."

"That is grosser than this footage I'm reviewing," Eli says, wincing at the mental image. On the screen in front of him, intestines are being consumed.

Zora's eyes go wide when she finally focuses on the screen, then she reprimands Eli, "This is not footage we should be screening here. This has nothing to do with the movement."

"The Tidal Generator is making people go crazy," Eli points out, as if zombies are in the cards for the future.

"This is a movie, dear," Zora counters.

Eli nods, then holds up a DVD case, "It's *Cannibal Holocaust*."

"Yes, but this never happened."

"Are you a cannibal holocaust denier?" Eli asks, disgusted.

Zora slams her purse down in front of Eli, then says, "Here's what you'll be watching today. Time to swab The Poop Deck, guys."

"If you need me to watch your purse while you go take a dump. No problem," Eli assures her.

Zora cocks her head to the side, and studies the man sitting in front of the Italian horror movie, then she says, "Eli, I worry about you."

"Waste your time how you want," Eli responds with a shrug.

Zora turns over her purse and thumb drives cascade out.

"Damn it," an Asian guy whines.



Eli turns to the Asian guy, and says, "Better thumb drives than human thumbs."

"That's charming, dear. How long have you been waiting to use that one?"

"I actually just thought of it."

"Very good, Eli."

"Thanks."

"Now find Mamma some blackmail material," Zora requests, lingering until Eli closes out of the movie, then grabs a thumb drive and pops it into an open USB port on the PC tower to his right.

The folder for the drive opens on Eli's screen, and he glances at the four files he's presented with. He clicks the first .avi.

The clip begins playing. A good-looking man with a fake mustache begins doing a very shitty Daniel Plainview impression, and Eli whines, "Damn it, Zora. This is just another actor's reel."

Zora nods at this, then sighs at the reality of it all, "That's the hazard of having a revolution filled with out-of-work actors. Just proceed onto the next one."

Eli removes the one thumb drive, then pops in another. The drive's contents opens, and he clicks the only file, a .wmv.

We instantly look away, as Eli declares, "Damn it, Zora. This is just another guy jerking off while making very direct eye contact with the lens of his webcam."

"You know those are valuable sometimes. Keep watching to make sure that it's not someone famous or powerful jerking his half-limp cock," Zora says.

"He has a poster of Sonic the Hedgehog on his wall, and he's a grown man," Eli points out.

"Alright, then just upload it to the USIDeath IJODB, give it a descriptive file name, then keep it moving," Zora says, leaving Eli to the task, and as she passes by the whiny Asian guy, she says, "Kenny, I hope you're keeping quiet."

"You too, Zora," Kenny says warmly. This causes Zora to pause for a moment, but eventually she seems to decide to merely leave Eli and the rest of the guys to screen the remainder of the thumb drives.

"Why'd she ask that quiet Asian guy if he was keeping quiet? That's the type of racist shit these Neo-Marxists will get a person fired for," we point

out.

*"Because that's Kenny Chen. He works for USIDent."*

"Yet he's in the compound?"

*"He's the guy who brought up the USIDeath network."*

"What happens when Nana Mae finds out about that?"

*"What do you think?"*

"Why would he take that risk?"

*"You ever hate your job?"*

"Every day, but not enough to risk my ass for it."

*"Well imagine if your job was your life."*

This makes sense to us, so we just hope that poor Kenny stays quiet.

This would have been the perfect time to cut to literally anywhere else, but unfortunately, the feed stays tracking Zora, as she walks into the main room of the Neo-Marxist compound. She rushes over to Ronald, who has a Liquid Karma syringe in his hand and he's sitting up bolt-straight, eyes wide.

Across the room, tied up, is Roland Taverner, who's no longer bleeding on the Liquid Karma, and is now screaming through his bandanna-gag at Zora.

"Roland, is this you telling me you have to do pee pee? If you wet yourself on my floor, I'm going to make you lick it up."

Roland opens his eyes wide, as if to point out that he really has no choice in the matter at this point.

"Okay, okay, I'm going to take you to the bathroom, but I need you to behave yourself, you understand?" Zora asks, making her way toward the unhappy captive.

Roland nods- agreeing to her terms- but he has no reason to keep his promise. Despite knowing this, Zora bends down and unties Roland's feet, then she helps him stand. With his hands bound behind his back, we begin to wonder how this interaction in the bathroom will go. The question of *Will Zora aim for him?* is an intrigue that seems appropriate for this day that is being tilted by the rift.

As the duo walks to the bathroom, we feel relief that this will get us out of the compound, but that relief fades when the feed clicks over to a camera in the corner of the bathroom and we have to wonder if this is something that Kenny set up because he's a mole for Nana Mae, or because he's become such an entitled pervert by working at USIDent that he believes

voyeurism potty cams is not only one of his fetishes, but also his responsibility as a patriot.

Zora removes Roland's gag, then leads him over to the toilet. "You gonna untie my hands, or..." Roland asks, and Zora thinks hard, then decides to say, of all things, "Let Mamma undo your pants and you can make potty." Zora unbuckles his jeans, then pulls his pants down enough that his dick is out.

We realize that we can hear everything, which makes us respect Kenny even less. Not only is someone in this compound a toilet-cam perv, but they also wired the feed for sound, so every porcelain-echoing ass-blast will be captured in pristine fidelity. The fact that Roland uses the bathroom confuses us. Boxer doesn't eat or drink or use the bathroom, Ronald doesn't eat or drink or use the bathroom, yet Roland does. We begin to presume that the other Taverner might be faking his lack of hunger because he's afraid that Zora will feed him tainted food.

When Roland finishes peeing, his shoulders jolting with relief, then Zora raises his jeans, and buckles his belt, but instead of walking out of the bathroom, Roland sits down on the lid of the toilet.

"Oh, honey. I already zipped ya back up."

"When I walked in here, I glanced at the mirror," Roland says, staring directly at Zora.

"You look good with a slight beard, hon."

"I don't have a reflection," Roland says.

"Your parents didn't want to tell you, but you're a Dracula, Roland," Zora says, going with what she seems to perceive to be an ironclad improv.

"Zora, why is there someone who looks like me in the other room?" Roland asks, through his teeth.

"That's your brother, and he's replacing you because you're wanted by the US government."

"I don't have a brother."

"You *do* have a brother. As well as memory loss," Zora says.

"I remember everything," Roland responds, "You know that."

"You need to pretend like you forgot that shit then," Zora says, teeth gritted.

"I'm going to escape here, and I'm going to turn myself in," Roland threatens.

"You can't."

"Why can't I?"

"Because you did something terrible, and the world out there might not know it, but the government does, and they have every incentive to wipe you off the map."

"Why?" Roland exhales.

"Because they covered for you, for what you did."

"I didn't do anything. I did my job. That's all," Roland maintains.

"Wait here," Zora says, then she walks out of the bathroom. We expect Roland to begin a struggle to unbind his hands and escape, but he doesn't do that. He waits, like a dog tied to a post. We lean forward, and we watch him take heavy gasps of air. It appears that he feels guilty in his heart, and now he'll finally be able to be called out for what he did. His silent battle can now include yelling. That buzzing anxiety will have a cause, and in locating that cause, at least he will have a target for his future- something to fix if he was to find freedom.

"Okay, here we go," Zora says, appearing in front of Roland, holding out a horizontal poster.

"Returning Soldiers, remember..." Roland reads, and before he can finish the statement, Pilot taps out, and stands up.

*"I reconsidered. I actually do want to go to The Poop Deck for lunch."*

"No. Sit back down. You're right," we say, not letting Pilot dodge us again. He asked for our help, and we aren't a rubber duck- we're a friend- and friends don't let friends push down emotions.

Pilot moves away from the turret, and shakes his head.

*"I wasn't right. I wasn't right. Let's go. I want to go."*

"No. Get back here," we demand.

Pilot doesn't comply, and we sit on our hands. It's difficult to attempt to limit a soldier's freedoms, when our freedoms come from his actions in the past.

We watch as the soldier goes AWOL. He climbs down from the roof, and we hear him clank hard onto the walkway.

We don't follow him, and he doesn't come back.

On the screen, we watch as Roland gasps, tears in his eyes, "I didn't do that on purpose it was..."

"Regardless of if it was intentional or not, you did this to him. Friendly fire," Zora says.

“Friendly fire,” Roland exhales, his face contorting into a mask of pain.

“Friendly fire,” Zora repeats.

“Friendly fire,” Roland gasps.

“This was your best friend in the world, and you were placed in a pressure situation, and you shot him in the face,” Zora states, then repeats, “Friendly fire.”

“Friendly fire,” Roland responds, like an echo.

A blue light begins to glow behind Roland, where his hands are bound.

We understand how dependent we are on Pilot because we're immediately lost regarding what's happening now that he's no longer by our side.

The glow from behind Roland causes Zora to drop the poster, then she reaches to the small of her back, and pulls out a Treer syringe of red Liquid Karma. “Drop it, Roland,” Zora demands, holding the syringe like a butcher's knife.

Roland tries to free himself, manically moving his body back and forth, thudding his head against the heavily-graffitied tile wall, while chanting, “Friendly fire, friendly fire.”

“Last chance, Taverner. Drop it!” Zora yells, and when Roland's freak out doesn't cease, Zora mashes his face with her right hand, then with her left, she stabs the syringe of Liquid Karma into Roland's neck.

Roland instantly goes wide-eyed and leans on the wall for support, then Zora pulls him forward, tossing him face-first onto the floor so she can see what he's holding. While she tries to open his clenched fists, Roland's cheek remains pressed against the image of Pilot and the *NOW* girls on the poster. Roland and Pilot are eye-to-injured-eye.

The moment that Zora finally gets Roland's hand open enough that she can see what's in his palm, the blue light goes out.

Zora, totally perplexed, starts looking around on the floor. She gets up, then walks over and glances in the toilet.

With Roland now high on Liquid Karma, and confirmed to be unarmed, Zora is in full control. She sits Roland up, and grabs the poster off the bathroom floor.

Her hands on her hips, she stares at Roland, and asks, “How did you glow?” then she looks directly up to the camera and makes digital eye-contact with us. We look away, but then laugh at our own pathetic reaction.

When we turn back to the screen, we see that Zora is headed back through the compound.

She ends up in the room where Eli, Kenny the mole, and the boys are checking the USBs.

"This is another mixtape," Eli says, frustrated, then pulls out the drive and tosses it into a pile of rejects.

"Wow, Eli, doing work, quite impressive. My management skills know no bounds," Zora says, making her way into the room.

"Management is a Capitalist concept," Kenny says.

"Hush up' is a Kenny Chan concept. Or at least I wish it was," Zora responds. Standing behind Eli, she requests, "Hey, huh, could you bring up the bathroom camera for the compound?"

"No. DREAM already made me fall for this once," Eli says, grabbing another USB drive.

"Okay, if you don't want to see one of our captives using their superpowers, then that's fine, I'll ask, Kenny," Zora responds.

Since Eli seems to be taking Kenny's place regarding getting shit on, Kenny complies with what Zora wants by switching away from the basic interface to what looks like a security program where all the cameras monitoring the compound appear in a grid. Kenny clicks on the camera for the bathroom, and when he sees Roland sitting on the floor, he asks, "Did you knock him out?"

"I just gave him a little Liquid Karma," Zora responds, then twirls her finger to get Kenny to rewind the footage.

We watch Roland go from sitting, to face down, to standing, and when the glow is apparent, Kenny freezes the footage, then asks, "What the fuck is that?"

"That's the question that brought me down here," Zora responds.

As Eli leans over to get a look at this mystery, the feed switches abruptly.

We're confronted with footage so personal that it almost makes us want to leave the turret like Pilot did, but we stay put because we're now with Pilot, in a way.

We watch from an unsteady dashcam, as Pilot, in his Firebird, burns rubber up the 1, away from Venice Beach. His driving is reckless, his teeth are gritted, his surroundings are a blur. Car horns scream at him as he drives like a man possessed. We take out our phone, but as soon as we open

it, we flip it shut because we don't even have Pilot's number. We're powerless when it comes to saving Pilot, so how are we supposed to save the world? All we can do is watch the screen, and this feeling of helplessness is absolute. We need a miracle; Pilot must remain unscathed after this careening escape.

The Firebird is swerving recklessly, to the point that the dangerous traffic-slicing is noticeable from the limited view of the dashcam. We wonder how Pilot could get into this relic, this gas-powered vehicle- his inheritance- and treat it so disrespectfully.

All of the people on the laptop screen today seem to be subsumed by the past, and all we can do is focus on the future. We now understand that merely watching is not enough. This morning, we saw Krysta Now, and we easily could have told her that she needs to work with Simon Theory to put together a complete review regarding if Revelation is upon us. Instead of doing this, we said nothing, and retreated here.

It's totally silent except for the ocean around us roaring, and in a moment that sends us over the edge, for the first time, footage repeats on the screen, and it's Krysta, in the taxi, realizing, "A young Inga looked out at the ocean like it was a cash crop she had to wait to harvest."

Boxer responds, "After a long second, she looked over at me, and said, 'The Pacific Ocean is God's least celebrated miracle.' Her heavy German accent was unmistakable. I recognized it immediately, so I nodded, and she added, 'Even a massive and powerful man such as yourself must look in wide-eyed fear at the ocean below us.'"

God.

The ultimate editor. The one who sees all. He has returned, not to Earth, but to our heart, and for the first time since high school, we close our eyes, perform the sign of the cross, press our palms together, then recite:

*"Our Father who art in Heaven  
Hallowed be thy name  
Thy kingdom come  
Thy will be done  
On Earth, as it is in Heaven  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses*

*as we forgive those who trespassed against us  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil  
Amen."*

After a moment, we put together what we want to say, and we pray:

*"Dear God, please protect Pilot Abilene. He's invested in the safety and security of not only the nation he was sent to war to protect, but also the entire world. The information that's provided on this screen, whether sent by You, or by someone acting on Your behalf, has shown me that there's so much work to be done on Your Earth in such a short amount of time, and You have my word that if I get Pilot Abilene back at my side, I will do everything in my power to ensure that this is not the end of days, but instead the end of an apathy that has infected me, and so many others. This is a plague I've seen spread, and I will work to fight it, to save others. I've been paying attention, I've read your words, I've found the strength to have faith again, and I'm willing to sacrifice myself in order to save what You've created. I've met someone who made a sacrifice for me, without even knowing me, and as I felt complicated emotions about their actions, Your sacrifice became real to me in a way that it had never been before. I realized that if this man could have faith in me, I knew that I could have faith in You. A distance I created has been closed, like I've stepped into a rift, and I'll remain by Your side, so You don't need to come to me. Please, protect Pilot Abilene, Boxer Santaros, Krysta Kapowski, and the Taverners. I need them, and they need me, and we all need you. Amen."*

We perform the sign of the cross again, then open our eyes, and see that the feed has returned to Pilot's dashcam, that he's no longer driving. His car is now safely parked.



Pilot is looking into the lens, staring at us, and we wish there was a way to speak with him. Pilot doesn't blink, and there's a slack sadness in his face as he peers into our soul, unsmiling.

We stare back at Pilot for a full minute before we have to blink, and after we do, we understand, Pilot Abilene is high on Liquid Karma.

The screen doesn't cut away, and after watching Pilot in this altered state for nearly five minutes, we find ourselves exhausted, and we understand that Pilot was able to leave the roof because there's nothing more we need to see.

We close the laptop, but we leave it attached to the turret. We leave the recording rifle sight turned on, pointed toward the beach. We pick up Pilot's Bible, then we lift the seat we've been sitting on and we store the Bible atop a box of 50 cal shells.

We call it a night, despite the fact that the feed is still live.

The one massive question we have, as we climb down from the roof, is *Did Pilot Abilene do this so that we would get our faith back?*

We make our way down the stairs of the Mariasol and an additional question burns just as brightly in the back of our mind- *Did Pilot want us to regain our faith so that we could battle the horsemen of the apocalypse, or did he want us to have a deep relationship with God so that when He arrived, we would be saved?*

We know firsthand that Pilot cannot bear seeing his friends suffer, and on that screen, he glimpsed the internal pain that his best friend is feeling because of what happened between them. This is the way that pain endures- both with a scar, and with an open wound.

We know so much now. Our understanding of the world around us is evolving faster than ever before, but that doesn't mean we'll give up on devoting our entire being to acquiring a deep grasp of our surroundings. A city we thought would be a vacation from the stress of our life now stands on the brink of social, economic, and environmental disaster. We don't know what will happen during the course of the remaining days that will culminate in that massive 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration. It will either be a victory that will serve as a testament to America's ability to persevere as the one true super-elite power in the world... or it will be a repeat of the past, combined with the disruption we've caused in the present.

No matter what happens, we will never look at Pilot Abilene the same way. He's someone that we once viewed as a mere celebrity, but we now

regard as a true American hero, the likes of whom we've rarely seen in this new millennium.

Once back in our sparse motel room, cocooned in its simplicity, we try to go to sleep, but a nagging point in the footage we watched today is stuck in our craw. Boxer said that, in the screenplay, he has to kill Dr. Muriel Fox. At no time did we even get a hint of why that would have to happen, so in order to be able to sleep, we turn on our laptop, open the .pdf, and continue reading as Boxer, Muriel, and Caleb turn a Mooby's stop into a full-on soap opera.

We read:

Muriel's eyes widen. *She senses something.*

SHAWNA

What is it?

MURIEL

Someone's coming.

SHAWNA

Who?

Muriel rubs a pink crystal against her palm, then touches it to her temple.

MURIEL

He drives a black Hummer.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- MOMENTS LATER**

A BLACK HUMMER pulls into the parking lot, blasting HIP-HOP MUSIC.

The Hummer door opens and a white teenager with a goatee named VIKTER FAURMANE (19) steps out. He wears baggy jeans, an oversized white T-shirt, and SILVER BLING DOG TAGS.

Vikter moves toward the entrance to the restaurant.

**INT. MOOBY'S -- BOOTH -- NEXT**

Muriel, Boxer, Caleb, and Shawna sit at a table... they watch Vikter enter the restaurant, then approach the counter to place his order.

SHAWNA

Him. That kid. He's the one who will  
kill you, Muriel.

Muriel rubs the pink crystal in her palm, then places it at her temple.

MURIEL

You're right. He's the executioner.

Vikter gets his food, then walks over and sits down at the table next to Jericho, Krysta, Caleb, and Shawna.

Caleb begins to stare at Vikter... mimicking his actions- both boys chow down on FRIES.

When he runs out of fries, Caleb lets out a massive BURP... turning heads as far as the play place.

VIKTER

Sheeeit. Control y'all's kids. This  
next generation is gonna be mad  
fucked up if you let those little  
bastards do whatever they want with  
no manners. Fuck.

SHAWNA

Take your jive somewhere else, nerd.  
People are trying to eat here.

Vikter sees Shawna is wearing a Mooby's uniform.

VIKTER

Bitch, you better get back behind  
that register.

MURIEL

What's your name?

VIKTER

What's your name, shorty? You  
slammin'. Titties lookin' right.

MURIEL

My name is Dr. Muriel Fox.

VIKTER

I was just about to ask yo ass if you  
wanted to play doctor.

MURIEL

I asked you a question. What is your  
name?

VIKTER

I'm Vikter Faurmane, but my rap name  
is Frankie Nutzzz. Three z's, but  
don't sleep on this dick, sleep wit'  
this dick. Ya heard?

Caleb's eyes open wide.

CALEB

Vik-ter Faur-mane.

Caleb then lets out a fierce HISSING sound... as a  
cloud of WHITE SMOKE erupts from his mouth.

Vikter begins to cough as the smoke engulfs him. Diners in the surrounding booths begin to shriek, thinking that someone has tear gassed the restaurant.

JERICO

What the... what's happening, Caleb?

A FAT WOMAN, seated at an adjacent table, VOMITS all over the floor. Other patrons begin to follow suit, trying to flee, slipping in the vomit, then vomiting more, creating a vicious vomit mosh pit of imbalance.

Vikter seems paralyzed by the smoke... his eyes do not blink.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- NEXT**

Two BLACK SUBURBANS pull into the parking lot.

Two MEN IN TURBANS emerge from the vehicle, with AK-47's... aiming toward the restaurant. These are the same men who killed Tawna.

A massive FART shatters the glass windows of Mooby's. The Earth begins to SHAKE...

**INT. MOOBY'S -- NEXT**

The Mooby's is trembling. DUST falls from the ceiling.

MURIEL

HIT THE FLOOR!

Jericho, Muriel, and Shawna get under the table.

The dust continues to fall, as BULLETS rip through the restaurant.

PATRONS are hit by stray bullets while trying to run across the vomit covered floors... BLOOD sprays through the smoke, across table tops, and onto the tile floor.

Baby Caleb walks toward the front of the restaurant, now the size of an eight-year-old... he's oblivious to the torrent of bullets that whiz through the smoke.

He opens his RIGHT PALM and a FIREBALL begins to form several inches above his hand. He launches the fireball out into the parking lot.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- NEXT**

The FIREBALL streaks across the parking lot and hits one of the black Suburbans, lifting it off the ground in a huge EXPLOSION.

Seconds later... another FIREBALL is launched and strikes the second truck... exploding it in a MAELSTROM OF FIRE.

Caleb steps out into the lot, FARTS, then turns back toward the sound of cracking asphalt.

The BUILDING, including the play place, appears to detach from the concrete foundation, as the fart-force pushes it into the air.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- NEXT**

The entire restaurant SEPARATES FROM THE CEMENT FOUNDATION and begins to levitate up into the air.

**INT. MOOBY'S -- NEXT**

EXTREME CLOSE UP: Vikter Faurmane's face as he begins to smile, while everything collapses around him.

**EXT. MOOBY'S -- PARKING LOT -- NEXT**

As the Suburbans continue to burn in the parking lot... the restaurant rises even higher up into the sky... rotating slowly in a clockwise direction.

**INT. MOOBY'S -- NEXT**

Muriel crawls across the cracking floor toward Shawna... When Krysta reaches her, she sees that a METAL BEAM has bisected Shawna.

MURIEL

Shawna!

Life drains from Shawna's eyes as she joins her sister in the hereafter.

Muriel looks for help... and locks eyes with Jericho... as the restaurant continues its ascent into the clouds.

Jericho begins to rush toward Muriel... but the floor opens up between them, and they're separated by CHASM.

MURIEL

We can't stay in here!

JERICHO

We'll have to jump!

MURIEL

We'll never survive the fall!

Jericho stares down at the widening gap between himself and Muriel.

JERICHO

Then let's go out together!

MURIEL

Body to body...

JERICHO

Heart to heart...

MURIEL

Soul to soul...

JERICHO

I love you, Dr. Muriel Fox.

MURIEL

I love you, Jericho Cane.

The couple looks at each other across the chasm... then they begin running at the exact same time, and they collide, body to body, heart to heart, soul to soul, then they spiral down, together, through the rift in the floor, to the unforgiving asphalt below.

On the scan of the script we're reading, a tear stain appears, like Krysta had begun crying while reading this scene, and the tear sliced through her eyeliner, then dropped onto the page.

We feel nothing regarding this story that's being told, but this is the same distance we feel when we read *The Book of Revelation*.

This portion of the script is so profoundly shitty, that we begin to google, searching for information that will once again inspire us to try to save the world.

*The Wired* piece about the von Westphalens did provide some interesting information, so we try to find more background regarding the



other players in our California existence, to allow us to be better equipped to face the future.

Of all the searches we could perform, we choose to google Pilot Abilene for the first time since arriving in LA.

We find an old profile from one of those *Tiger Beat*-type magazines, and while most of it is fluff, there's a short quote where Pilot references his mother's death. That's the term he uses- *my mother's death*. Despite other members of his family dying that day as well, he singled out his mother, and this peaks our interest.

Our google search gets more detailed, and becomes, "Pilot Abilene mother mom."

We find a *Daily Variety* profile written by Ash Wallace, and once we click on the link, and Ctrl+F to the portion we're looking for, we read about Pilot's mother, and her death, which happened long before the blast in Abilene.

In the profile, Pilot talks about how his mother died in a car accident on the PCH, while she was taking him to an audition. The audition she was taking him to... was for *Tristan's Landing*.

Pilot, for obvious reasons, never made the audition- it was rescheduled- but he did return, and he did audition, a mere two weeks after his mother's death. He didn't make this quick return because the teleplay for the show spoke to him, but instead because he could "hear his mother speaking to him," and when she communicated with him, "she told me that I need to take the audition, become the character, and live my dream."

It's likely that we never heard about this story because the producers of *Tristan's Landing* didn't want this dark doom connected with their show.

It's likely we never heard about this story because it was easier to have the implication that Pilot lost everything on that tragic day in his hometown.

It's likely we never heard about this story because Pilot thinks it's his fault his mother is dead.

We had enough information, without *this* information. We knew Pilot nailed the audition, we knew that he was immensely popular on *Tristan's Landing*, and now we know that his heart looks like his face- beautiful, yet scarred.

V-

## MEMORY GOSPEL- JULY 3<sup>RD</sup> 2008

Atop the Mariasol, the morning sun is cooking everything, despite being hidden by the heavy ghostly fog from the Tidal Generator.

We don't say hello when we sit down on the turret next to Pilot, instead, we say, "Yesterday afternoon can't happen again."

Pilot nods, then looks into the sight on his rifle, and after his intense car ride and the uncharacteristic drug injection last night, we fear that he too is infected by the imbalance of the rift, and today, for the first time, we'll hear that rifle clap.

Mercifully the feed buzzes on, and on the screen is a very different beach scene, that's part infomercial and part swimsuit shoot.

Krysta is out on the beach, frolicking with the *NOW* girls.

Pilot removes his eye from the sight, and watches the hot porn whores dance. This seems to cheer him up, and redirect his testosterone.

On the bottom right-hand corner of the screen are the three letters "NOW," but the O is presented as, what appears to be, for all intents and purposes, a gaping butthole. Below the logo, stretching horizontally, is a news crawl that has a message about how the Palm Desert temperatures are climbing to 140 degrees, and select contamination zones have been cleared in Texas for resettlement.

The footage cuts to Krysta sitting in a row with her porno-friends on a particularly windy portion of the beach. She reads from a blue card, saying, "Welcome. I'm Krysta, Krysta Now. And we're here, live in Malibu, with my guests today... Shoshana Cox-" Shoshana waves at the camera, and her blonde highlights don't look as bad on TV as they do on the feed, "-Sheena Gee-" Sheena has her hair up, while Krysta's hair is down, and this was probably a suggestion by Cyndi so that their identities were distinguishable, "-and Deena Storm," Deena is so tan she's almost orange. "Join us for an in-depth discussion of the penetrating issues facing society today... issues like abortion, racism, crime, poverty, social reform, quantum teleportation, double penetration, and war."

“Did she just say quantum teleportation?” we ask.

*“That was the one that concerned you?”*

“I’ve seen Deena do double vaginal, but I’ve never seen her teleport.”

Pilot gives us a nod that denotes agreement.

Krysta flips to the next card, and says, “Now, we all made the decision in our youth to start doing porn.”

“And once you get on the Bang Bus, you never get off,” Sheena says.

“You know what?” Deena asks, but no one responds, so she says, “The Bang Bus should be banned. It’s totally unethical, even within the parameters of porno. I mean, I wanted to wear a seat belt during my shoot, but they were like, ‘How would you wear a seat belt while you’re on all fours getting plowed?’”

“The Maxx Hardcore shit is out of hand too,” Shoshana says.

“I don’t have an XBox to play that on, and the bullet-time stuff is played out,” Krysta dismisses the topic.

Deena shakes her head, then asks, “I mean do you like to get slapped to the ground and fucked?”

All the girls are silent and they look to each other, trying to see if they can admit they do.

“Too violent,” eventually Deena has to say, answering her own question.

“Violence and sex should not mix,” Sheena says, finding a way to support her friend, without speaking out against something hot, like choking.

“Violence gives porn a bad name,” Krysta, the brand-conscious girl, says.

There’s a minor lull in the conversation, which Krysta, as the host, knows she has to fill, so she goes for the crowd-pleasing statement of, “You know what? I like to get fucked. I like to get fucked hard.”

“Weird, that’s actually the opening sentence of my Match.com profile,” Shoshana says, pleased by this coincidence.

“Okay, but let’s be clear- I want my pussy to get pounded, but not my eye sockets,” Deena adds.

“That aggression is the primary reason why I won’t do anal,” Krysta says.

All the girls look to her.

“Anymore,” Krysta has to add.

"I didn't know that was the reason why. I thought it was to keep your fees up," Sheena says.

"This convo makes me want to give up giving up my asshole," Deena says, sounding inspired.

"You can do it. Women have untapped power. Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine upheaval, but most of us behave ourselves- unlike men- which brings us to our second issue today, which is... terrorism," Krysta continues, with a clunky segue.

"I'm not for it," Sheena says, flat out.

"Me neither," Shoshana confirms.

"The only thing that hurts more people than terrorism is BDSM," Deena says.

"Yeah, I can't even use clothespins for my laundry anymore without cumming," Sheena says, annoyed at this inconvenience.

"How do we stop it?" Krysta asks, unspecifically.

"Hide all the wooden stocks in Chatsworth?" Deena suggests.

"No, not BDSM, I mean terrorism," Krysta narrows the scope.

"Do we need a safe word for terrorism?" Shoshana asks.

"Nothing is safe with terrorism, even your safe word," Sheena warns.

"In a world without a safe word for acts of dominance, we're all fucked beyond feeling," Krysta says.

"How do we change the status quo?" Sheena asks.

Krysta shares, "I've been turning the tables, and domming men on live chats for my fan site. I'm getting them accustomed to a woman calling the shots, while also making fun of their tiny dick."

"I wish I could have a fansite," Shoshana sighs.

"You have a shitload of fans!" Sheena assures her.

"Yeah, but now with the regulation of porn domains, rich dicks are buying up the licenses, then making girls do... things... for them," Shoshana reveals, then tries to end the segment on a bright note by saying, "I do have a pretty nice massage therapy website though," and we realize the more the government regulates, the more things stay the same.

The feed suddenly switches to show Fortunio, in the living room of the house on Hermosa Beach, watching the TV, and Krysta is standing behind him.

Pilot points at the screen.

*"There you go. Now you've seen quantum teleportation."*

We can't help but laugh, and it feels good that Pilot is still able to joke with us.

Staring into the lens of the camera embedded in the TV, Krysta tells Fortunio, "I met with the lady from CTV about this show and she's making me undertake more changes."

"Well, in that case, take your own advice," Fortunio says, then he ironically parrots her talking point, "Anyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine upheaval."

"Oh, I'm totally with you. I told her she can't fuck with my show. I'm going to deliver something she won't be able to question."

"You're going to drop the entire talk show format in favor of airing porno?" Fortunio asks hopefully.

"No. Probably not... no. The network would freak. Which is bullshit, because, deep down, inside, everyone wishes they were a pornstar," Krysta declares.

"Really?" Fortunio asks, shaking his head.

"We're a bi-sexual nation living in denial, all because of a bunch of nerds who got off a boat in the 15th century and decided that sex was something to be ashamed of. All the Pilgrims did was ruin the American Indian orgy of freedom."

"Tragic," Fortunio responds inauthentically.

"Whatever..." Krysta dismisses him, before adding, "...and by the way, I heard about this little ride-along you're putting together. You can't keep things from me."

Fortunio looks behind him to make sure that Boxer isn't in the room, then he explains, "We're doing it for the sake of the movie. I'm a producer."

"I know," Krysta says.

"And you're cool with it?"

"I just need the footage," Krysta says.

"For, like, the DVD special features?" Fortunio asks, not following. The fact that he can't fathom Krysta being a Neo-Marxist is such a relief.

Krysta shakes her head, and says, "No, for my sh-" but then she abruptly stops talking, as we hear heavy steps. The steps get louder until Boxer enters the frame. Krysta walks over to him, looking guilty, and asks in a babydoll voice, "How are ya feelin'?"

"Are you planning things behind my back?" Boxer questions, with a Jericho Cane level of intuition.

"You have to trust me. I'm here to protect you," Krysta assures him.

"From whom?" Boxer asks.

Krysta must know that she needs to remain vague so that Boxer remains low profile, so she says, "From the people out there who want to destroy you."

"Why would people want to destroy me?"

"Because you're Jericho Cane, tasked with saving the world," Krysta tells him, making direct eye contact. Boxer's eyes go wide, as he says, "I'm not Je-"

"-I know, and that's why we got you a ride-along for today, so you can further understand what it's like to be Jericho Cane," Krysta assures him. "You'll be able to sit in a cruiser with a real UPU2 and you'll see exactly what it's like. I think this will bolster your confidence, and then you'll be Jericho Cane after you step out of that vehicle."

Boxer clearly isn't sold on this, and he asks, "Will you ride in the back seat, or-"

"-you'll film it for me, then we'll watch your footage together," Krysta says, then sheepishly adds, "Muriel has to be distanced from what being a UPU2 is like because she's fragile."

Boxer nods at this, and goes along with the plan, confirming, "We'll watch the footage I shoot, together, then you and I will do rewrites on our script, together."

With the ride-along almost certainly happening today, the feed jumps over to Cyndi Pinziki in what might be her apartment, or might be a commercial storefront that has the windows covered so customers don't walk in. She's sitting with a woman who's even dumpier looking than her, which is an accomplishment. We're watching these women from what must be a webcam. On the table is a tupperware full of something that looks like a disgusting sauce-covered hot dog platter on ice.

"What the fuck is she eating?" we ask Pilot.

*"Oh, she's not eating what's in that tupperware. Those are fingers."*

"Like human fingers?" we ask.

*"They certainly don't look like chicken fingers."*

"What the fuck does she have a platter of fingers for?"

*“Well, when they changed that hotly contested voter ID law to go from showing your ID to offering up a fingerprint, some paranoid maniacs said that people would start rigging elections by stealing fingers.”*

“And no one was going to do it, until the news suggested it to them,” we say, as the lady next to Cyndi takes a massive bong rip.

We don't even bother asking who Cyndi's friend is, because she's the poster child for Neo-Marxism. She's the type of woman you can instantly picture if you try to imagine the author of a highly outraged feminist blog. Yes, she's wearing a sleeveless shirt. Yes, her neck and head seem to be swallowing her chin. Yes, the wooden chair she's sitting in makes noises like a distressed bird every time she moves. These two are either dating, or have formed an alliance because no one else will hang out with them.

Cyndi points directly at the screen, which means that she's being filmed via a webcam, and she says, “I have one of our guys with a camera trained on Fortunio's balcony so it's only a matter of time before we get footage of Boxer with Fortunio. There will be questions about Boxer's new best friend, and I'll be more than happy to inform anyone who will listen that Fortunio is a drug dealer, pimp, and porno shoot booker.”

“Those last two are redundant,” the fat Neo-Marxist says in a voice that is only capable of whining.

“Alright, I'll switch it out with the rumor he's a co-producer on some new mystery project Boxer has been working on. I found out that Boxer's been crashing with Fortunio in Hermosa Beach all week. They hooked up on some drug binge in Vegas. Our little Krysta is going to use Boxer to get CTV the ratings we need, and in the process, she'll destroy Maddy Frost's marriage, which will- last but not least- throw the Republican Party into disarray as their dirty laundry is aired to the world. As it stands right now, the general public already knows that Boxer hasn't talked to his wife in a week. Every day, she's on the campaign trail. and he's not. Nobody can pinpoint where Boxer has been, which I guess wouldn't be a problem if they weren't campaigning in fucking California of all places. Much to the Senator and his bitch wife's dismay, their perfect little system doesn't seem so hot when it comes to finding people who don't want to be found. Washington is already whispering. This looks like the nervous breakdown of the century, and it's going to have a blast-radius.”

"Too bad it's an election year," the fat Neo-Marxist says sarcastically, then points at the screen, and celebrates, "Speak of the devil! There's Mr. 20-million-a-picture himself, that cock-chugging capitalist!"

"Why would the guy who's supposed to be missing show up on a very public balcony, right in front of one of our cameras?" Cyndi asks, seeming downright unsettled that her plan actually worked.

"Maybe he's not hiding. Maybe he doesn't know he's missing," the fat Neo-Marxist says.

Cyndi shakes her head, wondering aloud, "Why would he do this at the most important time in his father-in-law's life?"

"You know what they say... nobody rocks the cock like Krysta Now," the fat Neo-Marxist responds.

"Alright, I'm going out!" a familiar voice shouts from far off camera, and we know this is Zora- it *has* to be.

Zora's presence in this space surprises us, and confirms completely that Cyndi is, at minimum, a very active Neo-Marxist, and it also suggests the possibility that Cyndi could even be the leader of the Neo-Marxist revolution.

"Are you getting the performance set up?" Cyndi yells, looking to her right.

"You betcha. Where's your checkbook, hun?" Zora questions, popping into frame, wearing what appears to be a fishnet bra over a tank top.

"You're going to buy the gun with a check?" Cyndi asks.

"Yuhuh," Zora responds.

Cyndi scoffs, then asks, "Don't you think that it could easily be traced back to me?"

"Oh, absolutely. That's why I'm not using my checks," is Zora's simple response.

Cyndi digs into her purse, then takes out a blue checkbook, "Here. This is the CTV checkbook they gave me so I could write Krysta her emergency check."

"Why does she need emergency money?" the fat Neo-Marxist asks, angry despite none of this involving her.

A smile creeps across Cyndi's face, as she reveals, "She's taking a porno break while she's shackled up in secret, fucking a large and powerful man."

"She's fucking Mark McGuire?" the fat Neo-Marxist asks, impressed.



“No. What? No, Teri. Come on! Sometimes I question your commitment to overthrowing the government. I’m talking about Boxer Santaros. We were literally just discussing this.”

“Groovy,” Zora says, and the way her eyes sparkle, we know that she’s imagining Krysta and Boxer fucking.

“Come back with that checkbook once you have the props purchased,” Cyndi demands.

“Perhaps!” Zora calls out, then slides the checkbook in her jeans, and makes her way to the door.

The feed follows Zora out of the flophouse, then it camera-hops as she makes her way down the strip of shops to an ice cream truck. This isn’t just any ice cream truck- this is Walter’s ice cream truck. The feed switches to his dash cam as Zora approaches his window.

Not even for a moment does Walter acknowledge his eager customer’s presence. It’s like he’s unwilling to arm Zora merely based on her unchill vibe.

No stranger to being ignored outright, Zora begins to perform the ice cream truck jingle “The Entertainer” in the form of a series of increasingly annoying “dings.”

“Please stop. Please stop. Please stop,” Walter repeats, still not looking at her. We’re surprised that Walter said please.

“I’d like some ice cream,” Zora says, robotically.

“We’re out,” Walter declares.

“My friend, Veronica, sent me.”

At the mention of this name, Walter closes his magazine, then says, “I should have known.”

“Ah yes, that’s precisely what every customer wants to hear,” Zora responds sarcastically.

Walter shoots her a death-stare, then says, “Meet me in the back.”

The dashcam is immediately jettisoned in favor of the camera in the rear of the truck- presumably installed so that Walter can present evidence of the warrantless seizure of his possessions that undoubtedly will happen at the hands of UPU3, unless the world ends first.

We didn’t notice the camera when we were in the back of this truck. It must always be recording, which means that there’s footage of us, in this truck, surrounded by weapons, including a rocket launcher.

If the world doesn't end on the 4<sup>th</sup>, this might become a problem for us in the future.

After the locks are popped and the door swings open, Zora climbs inside the truck with the type of excited anticipation the promise of ice cream spurs in a small child. Walter closes the door behind her, then in the intimate closeness demanded by the truck, Zora asks, "Walter, right?"

"No," Walter says, moving past Zora.

"I thought you were DREAM's dad... or boyfriend... it's hard to pin this stuff down with the daddy issues-"

"-no names," Walter grumbles, interrupting Zora.

"Ah, yes, we'll use code names. I like it. I'll be Queen Cobra," Zora coos.

"I said 'no names.' What do you want?"

"You could be King Cobra with those muscles," Zora says, admiring Walter's biceps through his army coat, "Do you work out? You know, there'd be a lot less violence in the world if everyone just got a little more cardio."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah," Walter mumbles, clearly already regretting this transaction before it's even complete.

Sensing that her time is almost up, Zora repeats to herself, "What do I want?" then turns and stares at the arsenal on the wall, before distractedly asking, "Hey, is that a bazooka?"

"That is a heat-seeking ground-to-air rocket launcher. You can't afford that, which leads me to my original question of what exactly do you want?" Walter responds, expediting Zora's departure.

"I need some blanks," Zora says, then nods rapidly, almost like she's prompting Walter into action with her hyper-expressions.

"What else do you need along with the blanks?" Walter asks, barely containing his displeasure.

"That's all, just the blanks," Zora responds, hands on her hips.

Through his teeth, Walter says, "Then go to Walmart if you need them. We have a \$400 minimum here."

"\$400 minimum? That seems a little steep," Zora says, and we have to wonder how she is in any position to question a man with a truck of weapons.

"My reputation precedes me," Walter responds.

"Right, but your reputation doesn't come with fine print about pricing," Zora points out.

"Now, hopefully, it will."

"Fine. Fine. I'd like the blanks and a UPU9," Zora decides.

"What were you going to fire the blanks out of without the UPU9?" Walter asks.

"Oh, we already have a UPU9, but I don't mind buying another because, I've found, in a police state, you'll need a spare for when Helter Skelter starts," Zora says, and Walter raises his eyebrows, seemingly confused regarding which side Zora is on in this clusterfuck.

Since Zora's presence inspires everyone toward the path of getting her away from them as expeditiously as possible, Walter bends down to get the box of blanks, and Zora begins writing out a check. When he stands back up with the merchandise, Walter says, "Here is your UPU9..." as he holds up a heavy looking handgun, then he lifts a box, "...and the blanks."

Zora holds out the check, and Walter sighs, "What the fuck is this?"

"What, you won't take a personal check?" Zora asks, putting her hands on her hips in the universal "Let me speak to your manager" pose.

"No, I won't take a fucking check," Walter spits back, taking the check, then throwing it over his shoulder, "Get the fuck out of my ice cream truck, you Cro-Magnon bitch."

Instead of retreating, Zora springs forward and puts Walter in a surprisingly effective choke-hold. While applying pressure on his windpipe, she taunts, "Say it again, man. Say it again, King Cobra."

Walter gasps for breath, and Zora lowers her head toward him, patronizingly asking, "Huh? What was that? Huh? What was that? Say it again, you cock-fucker!"

Zora finally lets Walter go, and as he rubs his neck, Zora puts her purchases in her purse, then unlocks the back door.

The feed flicks to the exterior security camera, and we watch Zora hop out of the truck, then continue on as though she didn't just assault an arms dealer.

Since we're seeing all this footage in real time, we're forced to watch Zora's entire return to the Neo-Marxist compound. The moment she reaches the room where the Taverners are being kept, we see who we assume is Ronald Taverner, dressed like Roland Taverner. He's in the full UPU2 outfit, and if we saw him on the street, we would heed his authority.

Today is the day that Ronald Taverner will become a pawn in a dangerous game of political extortion, against his will.

The idea that Walter could have given Zora real UPU2 9 bullets instead of blanks doesn't exactly displease us, but we don't wish violence to break out. We like the Taverner boys. They deserve to heal, without fearing they may inflict further pain.

"Okay, today is a big day for you. You need to remember what DREAM has been working with you on," Zora says to Ronald.

"DREAM is insane," is Ronald's only response.

Zora hands Ronald the UPU9, then says, "She sure is, dear. She sure is."

Ronald looks at the gun, then notices the hostler on his hip, and immediately holsters his weapon. "I'm going to... practice being my brother... in there," Ronald says, pointing to a door we believe leads to the bathroom.

"No problem, Roland," Zora says.

"I'm Ronald."

"Sounds like someone needs more practice," Zora scolds. "Today, you're officer Roland Taverner of the Hermosa Beach UPU2 department."

Ronald nods at this, then makes his way into the heavily graffitied bathroom that we last saw Roland in.

After shutting the door behind him, the feed hops to the potty-cam, and we watch as Ronald stands in front of a large mirror that's above the sink, and he begins staring at his reflection like he caught it doing something unexpected. We study the screen with the same confusion because, when Ronald raises his hand, his reflection will mimic the movement on a slight time delay. That's how it happens- Ronald moves, then the reflection moves- these actions never occur simultaneously. At first, we presume it's some sort of issue with the connection, but we realize that the lag would appear both with Ronald *and* his reflection if this was the case.

As Ronald plays Simon Says with his shadow, he rediscovers the gun, and he takes it out of the holster.

"Do I really need to carry a weapon?" he asks, and we think he's asking his shadow until we hear Zora's voice yelling back from outside the door, "You're a UPU2. Of course you need to pack heat. That weapon is one of your gateways to power-abuse."

"I'm not like you, Zora. I don't want to abuse power," Roland says, holding the gun away from his body, like its mere presence is a threat.

"One, I'm all about equality, which has no room for abuses of power, and two, I demand that you abuse your power as a UPU2 so everyone else

can be as angry as I am. Bottom line, you have to do this because you owe it to your twin brother,” Zora states.

Ronald begins to bend his elbow, slowly bringing the gun to his temple, and his reflection follows on a delay. We can't tell if he's doing this to test the reflection, or if Ronald Taverner forgot he's a pimp.

When Ronald stays so still that we consider the feed might have frozen, we hear Zora yell, “Ronald, I think it's time to come out and face the day, sweetheart.”

Hearing this, Ronald quickly points the gun at his reflection, then pulls the trigger. He gets his shot off before the reflection can move out of the way, and the blank goes off. The reflection doesn't fall back after this eardrum shattering bang, it pulls the trigger as well, and Ronald doesn't move out of the way, he stands there, unhurt. Both Ronald and his reflection pulled the trigger, and peace is the outcome. They holster their weapons.

We watch as Ronald turns, then walks out of the bathroom, while his reflection remains standing in place, watching him leave.

This asynchronicity is chilling, but the endearing impact is lessened as the feed shows us the security camera in the main room of the compound, where Zora is ranting, relieved, “There he is! Totally not dead! I told you guys. He's fine.”

Ronald raises his hands to show he has no wounds.

“Aw, look at you!” Zora coos.

“I just did look at me,” Ronald responds.

“Take this suntan lotion, and put it on, then let me have your 9 for the time being, considering the real UPU2 are probably already on the way here to investigate your little gunshot,” Zora says, and Ronald hands over his gun, then takes the suntan lotion. He pops open the bottle and squeezes it until it farts out a pile of lotion. As he coats his arms, he looks around and sees DREAM and Dion strapping these Ziploc bags of what looks like blood to their bodies. He points at them, then asks, “What are those?”

“Squibs,” Dion says, then looks down at the crudely taped rig to his chest. He sighs, “These things... these things better look real when you shoot DREAM.”

“When *I* shoot DREAM?” Ronald asks.

“Yeah, that's the plan,” DREAM responds.

“I don't like that. I don't want to point that gun at her,” Ronald says.

"You need to do that if you're going to be part of this team. I'm a legend here and you should be honored to shoot someone so prestigious," DREAM points out.

"-okay, I do kinda want to shoot her now," Ronald admits.

Zora hands Ronald the gun, then says, "Let's practice how it's going to go."

Ronald shrugs, then points the gun at DREAM, and without hesitation, he pulls the trigger.

The popping noise the gunshot makes is so loud it glitches the audio, which turns into a soup of screaming, as everyone in the main room of the compound- besides Roland- scatters for cover.

"Okay, now what?" Ronald asks, totally calm.

"Wowzers, that was incredibly poor planning on my part," Zora marvels.

"That's just great. We are on a hundred lists now," we hear DREAM complain.

Ronald puts the gun in his belt holster, then the right side of his mouth turns up in a smile.

"What were you thinking?" DREAM barks.

"Just now? I was thinking... that, in the bathroom, there was a delay in my reflection, which means that I'm not alone in this. I'm leading the way. I'm ahead of the curve. That's what I was thinking about," he responds, and suddenly everyone no longer seems mad at Ronald, as their anger has been replaced with concern.

Zora has to keep this plan together, so she assures him, "The lighting is weird in there. I get the same feeling."

"Do you do your makeup in there? Is that why it looks the way it does?" Ronald asks innocently.

"Okayyy, let's get ya to your cruiser," Zora says, not dignifying the question with a response.

"Why?" Ronald asks, then puts his hand on the butt of his UPU9.

"You need to become a UPU2. Come on, honey," Zora says warmly, "Let's dry our tears and face our fears."

"Promise me no one will get hurt," Ronald demands.

"We promise," Zora, DREAM, and Dion all say in unison.

"Promise me you won't hurt Roland," Ronald demands.

"We promise," the chorus repeats.

"He's still on that Liquid Karma?" Ronald asks, and we're not sure if he views this free drug binge as a good or a bad thing.

Zora nods, then says, "Yeah, but it's fine- he did it all the time in battle."

"He did it in battle? That seems unwise," Ronald muses.

"It proved to be," Zora confirms, then pushes Ronald to the door, clipping a cell phone on his belt, so he can be reached in two different ways.

We follow them via the cameras placed throughout the compound, until, outside, Ronald is shown his UPU2 cruiser.

The feed switches to the dashcam when Ronald enters the FluidKruiser, and Zora gets in the passenger seat.

After a quick tutorial on how to drive a car, Zora says, "Okay, hon, so here's how it's going to go. You're going to arrive at the house in Hermosa Beach- I programmed the address into your GPS- and you're going to knock on the front door. A man will ask you for a password, and you'll say, 'Jericho Cane.' Once inside, you're going to meet a fat bald guy- he'll most likely be wearing a tracksuit- and he's going to introduce you to Boxer Santaros. You're going to go for a drive, following along with the address I put into the GPS. One of the main tasks you have is to ask about his wife."

"Who's his wife?" Ronald asks.

"The daughter of the Republican Vice-Presidential nominee," Zora says.

"Is... she hot?" Ronald asks, unsure of why this woman is of interest.

"Yes. She's tall, and has a strong build, and probably does a shitload of cardio, but that's not the point, Ronald. You need to ask about her because Boxer Santaros is cheating on his wife with the pornstar, Krysta Now."

"This ride-along is going to be mutually beneficial," Ronald says, and we laugh at this, but Zora doesn't. She continues laying down the game plan, "You're going to get a call regarding a disturbance. Drive there. While you're driving, maybe you could say the N-word- which is nigger- that's the N-word, I mean."

"I don't think I'll be doing that," Ronald says, wincing.

"Maybe your dad was right about you. I'm going to call him," Zora says, but Ronald quickly reaches over and grabs her wrist. "I'll do what you need me to do. Not for you, but for my brother," he says.

"Just remember, I'll be in that compound with Roland, and if you don't say that word, your brother will pay," Zora warns, but Ronald's hateful glance causes her to quickly get out of the cruiser, then scamper back inside the compound.

Instead of the feed staying with Ronald, we watch camera-after-camera, as Zora makes her way through the compound.

When the feed clicks over to the final staircase, Zora sees a man on his phone, texting, and she screeches, “Bing, why are you not at video village setting things up?”

The texting guy flips his phone shut, then says, “Sorry, Zora. Squib concerns brought me here.” This guy, apparently nicknamed ‘Bing,’ looks like the 2008 version of Shaggy from *Scooby Doo*. He has cartoonish eyes, a red goatee, and he’s wearing some sort of white cotton jacket that might be what the Irish national soccer team wears during warm-ups. He’s exactly the type of loser who would join the Neo-Marxist revolution to make his CEO father mad.

“Of course there were squib concerns. You know that DREAM and Dion always freak out before a performance,” Zora says, as Bing follows her deeper into the compound.

“Well, the second reason I came here is that I couldn’t rollerblade all the way to Nowita Place, my thighs aren’t strong enough, so I was hoping I could get a ride,” Bing explains.

“Alright, Bing. You can join the carpool,” Zora says, then asks, “Did you bring Mamma her rollerblades?”

“Yeah, they’re in my backpack,” Bing says, as the two enter the main room of the compound.

“Good boy. Did you also bring your makeup kit?”

“Sure did, Zora,” Bing responds.

“Good boy,” she says again.

“Where’s Roland?” Bing asks, looking around.

“In the loft. Come on, I’ll show ya,” Zora responds.

They climb a ladder up to a loft area and the camera angle switches. Whoever bugged the Neo-Marxist compound did a profoundly thorough job.

We see Roland, gagged, still tied up, and the crotch of his pants soaked through. He stares, unblinking, at a fixed point of no interest to anyone besides himself.

“One Taverner can’t take a piss, and the other seems to be pissing for the both of them,” Zora says, then begins untying Roland’s legs so she can pull his pants off.

“I think he’s dead, Zora,” Bing says, worried.



It's very obvious that Roland is not dead, and that Bing is a moron.

"I just have him zonked on Liquid Karma," Zora says, then gags at the smell of the pants.

"How much of the stuff did you inject him with?" Bing questions.

"Enough to get an elephant bleeding into next Tuesday," Zora says.

Bing looks at the pantsless Roland with pity, then asks, "Aren't you worried that he could slip into a coma?"

"Normally, I would be, but he's been doing Liquid Karma longer than any man on the planet Earth. He's America's greatest bleeder," Zora states.

"If he was so good at it, you'd think he'd be able to retain control of his bladder," Bing notes.

"Shut up and hand me your pants," Zora responds.

"But I don't want Roland to piss *my* pants," Bing whines.

"Come on, might as well give someone else a turn," Zora says.

The feed jumps to a boardroom in what might be Treer Tower 1. By the abrupt whip-pans that are blurring what we're seeing, we know that Bobby Frost has his sunglasses back on. We can hear Vaughn giving an overview of the plans for the Southland trip, but we can't see him.

Bobby's POV focus settles on the screen of his laptop, and he watches Hustler tanks drive through the desert, around Lake Mead. He might have just mumbled, "Cool. Sweet. Cool," at this image.

Vaughn tells him, "One of our big talking points will be... are your sunglasses on?"

It's silent for a moment, then Bobby says, "Hip slogan. I get it. That's very LA," Bobby wipes his hand across the sky, and asks, "Are your sunglasses on?"

"I meant that as a genuine question to you, Bobby. I'd like to know if your sunglasses are streaming this conversation to Nana Mae," Vaughn clarifies.

Bobby lets out a snort of a laugh, then takes the sunglasses off, and says, "Not anymore they aren't."

The feed immediately hops to a camera in the corner of the room, and Vaughn is now in frame.

"She's not going to like that," Vaughn says.

"She's probably watching us from the ceiling dome-cameras as well, in which case..." Bobby waves at us, and says, "...love you, honey."

Vaughn motions with his hand for Bobby to duck his head so the camera can't read his lips, then they bend down, and we watch a static frame, as Vaughn explains, "I feel I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that Nana Mae has been... aggressive... in making sure we talk about how USIDent has unraveled a conspiracy involving the trafficking of human fingers. She wants the world to know that the Neo-Marxist cells are attempting to rig the upcoming election using rogue fingerprints from severed thumbs."

"What's the blow-back if we do that?" Bobby asks quietly.

"We're quickly learning that if you give a fringe group's crazy antics exposure, people will want to read about those crazy antics, then they'll type the name of the crazy antic group into their search bar on their computer. Maybe they'll find some information that makes it very clear how sad and dangerous this group is, or they could find one of the Neo-Marxist propaganda websites and end up joining those godless brats and become finger farmers themselves."

Bobby is silent for five full seconds, then he finally comes up with a possibility, "We shouldn't give the details, we should just get the word out to our base to protect their fingers."

"So an awareness campaign?" Vaughn asks, standing up, no longer using a hushed tone.

Bobby stands up as well, then nods at this, asking, "Do we have a 'Are your sunglasses on?' catchy type slogan for that?"

Both men are silent, then Bobby decides, "Mostly... the slogan should be... 'Be careful, because liberals will cut your fingers off.'"

"A campaign slogan almost entirely rooted in an irrational fear. That sounds good, Senator," Vaughn says, without a hint of irony.

Bobby eyes the camera we're watching him from, and he tries not to seem concerned that Nana Mae is monitoring this meeting. Or maybe he wants to make sure she saw him come up with that slogan on the fly?

"Let's go through the plan for today," he says, switching gears, and suddenly, instead of the security dome footage, we have a full view of Vaughn's laptop screen. No pop-ups appear on the laptop to tell the user that we've started watching them.

Whoever is assembling this feed for us is able to navigate from sunglasses camera, to dome-camera, to the laptop screen, like Spider-man web-slinging across the city.

After bringing up an Outlook calendar blocked out with various times for various events, we hear Vaughn explain, “Today, we’ll tour Utopia 3 at Santa Monica Pier. This will allow us to combat the intense criticism from environmental groups that we’re not doing enough to support the alternative fuel movement. They think we’re still over here mixing our coffee with oil.”

“Oil was good to us, but this Fluid Karma is an asset for America,” we hear Bobby say, in a way that seems rehearsed.

Vaughn mumbles, “Good,” confirming the party line, and it seems he’s confident about Bobby handling himself today, so he segues into that guilty pleasure every guy has of showing a friend fucked up stuff on the internet.

“Have you seen the Treer Vehicles commercials they’re running now?” Vaughn asks.

“Maybe. Probably,” Bobby says.

“Here’s the new spot,” Vaughn says, then we see someone typing the address <http://xxx.treervehiclesFK.xxx> into the browser.

A page pops up, with an embedded video, and the cursor navigates to the off-kilter triangle in the center of the frame, then what begins to play is a crude computer animation of a Los Angeles neighborhood development, filled with identical houses, green manicured lawns, sprinkler systems, and white picket fences. In the distance, the massive Tidal Generator, phallic, penetrating the sky, sends out pulses that travel through the neighborhood, causing two cars to “turn on.” On the north side of the street, a silver 2008 Treer Saltair idles.

In the side view mirror of the Saltair on the south side of the street, there’s a warning, “Objects In The Mirror Are As Big As They Appear.”

In the driveway across the street, the silver Treer Saltair begins to reverse.

“Strangers In The Night” by Frank Sinatra begins to play from one or both of the FluidKars, as the commercial cuts to a wide shot, were the vehicle that left the driveway pulls up behind the parked Saltair, then proceeds to mount it. From the trailer hitch of the top car, we see a metallic protrusion that snakes under the bottom Treer vehicle, making its way to the pulsing, yonic tailpipe of the parked FluidKar. Then, the one FluidKar fucks the other car, and a woman’s voice purrs, “The 2008 Treer Saltair. Cumming soon.”

After the commercial is over, the feed cuts back to the ceiling dome-camera in the conference room, and a bewildered Bobby Frost asks, "Did I just see two cars pork each other?"

"Indeed," Vaughn says, enjoying Bobby's horror.

"That was disgusting. Are we really going to put our backing behind these lunatics?" Bobby asks.

"I wouldn't worry. That's the European version," Vaughn points out.

Bobby relaxes a bit, then asks, "What's the American version look like?"

"It's the same thing as the European version, except the cars' grills and headlights make them look ashamed after they bang," Vaughn summarizes.

"As they should. It's about time we restore the American tradition of sexual shame that the Democrats tried to rob this country of once they started filling their interns' orifices with tobacco products," Bobby declares.

"Maybe we can save that quote for after the election," Vaughn suggests, then goes back to focusing on the laptop. After a couple clicks, he says, "Ut oh," and Bobby winces as he looks at the screen.

"Should I open it?" Vaughn asks.

Bobby nods.

Vaughn taps the trackpad, and both men stare at the screen.

"Would ya look at that," Bobby marvels, "I guess Nana Mae's Big Brother machine does work after all.

Both men are silent as they stare at the laptop screen, just as we're doing with Pilot.

"That's definitely Boxer," Vaughn finally says.

"Who's the lady he's on the balcony with? That is not my Madeline."

"That... is Krysta Now," Vaughn says.

"Why's that name sound familiar?" Bobby muses.

"She's filmed a lot of 'car commercials,'" Vaughn says.

Bobby closes his eyes in quiet dread.

"Let me open my iTunes," Vaughn says, because not enough time has passed since the last time Vaughn brought up some troubling shit.

"Here's the cover of her brand new album," Vaughn says, pointing at the screen.

Bobby reads, "Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime," then he pauses and feels the need to clarify, "I never said it was."

"Says here that the video is from Deepthroat Two. Do you have any experience with Deepthroat Two?" Vaughn asks.

"Deepthroat two of what?" Bobby asks.

"No, I think the two is sequential, as though we're dealing with the second Deepthroat, instead of the image of two erect penis' stacked atop each other, both stretching a mouth to capacity," Vaughn responds sincerely.

"Well let's find out. Just respond to the e-mail that you want Nana Mae to check the IP address of whoever sent the picture," Bobby orders.

"It's not that easy. Also in the e-mail that Nana Mae sent, she typed that she received this clip of Boxer from a machine routing from USIDeath. We can't trace it."

Suddenly, the laptop starts making a ringing noise, and Bobby squints at the screen, then says, "Well, how about that? Speak of the devil, we've got an incoming call from Deepthroat Two." Before he answers the call, he says, "Thanks for the transfer, babe," and it's clear that this conference call was all Nana Mae's idea. We're almost certain that she'll be using it to see how much information she can trace from a Neo-Marxist machine routing out of USIDeath.

Bobby hits a key on the computer, leans forward, then says, "Bobby Frost here. Who are you, and what do you want?"

We hear a response from a voice processed through a modulation scrambler, "This is Deepthroat Two. The bitch is back, and she's got Boxer Santaros on tape in compromising positions."

"Okay," Bobby responds, not really worried.

"One million dollars cash and a yes vote endorsement by the senator on Proposition 69 will make this video go away."

This doesn't trouble Bobby Frost- it makes him smile- and he says, "Miss Deepthroat Two, maybe you didn't understand. You are speaking with Senator, soon to be Vice President, Bobby Frost. I just saw a screenshot from your little movie, and I think it stinks. Furthermore, we do not negotiate with terrorists. And if you think you're going to get any money out of us, you've got miles to go before you sleep, and miles to go before you sleep!" then instead of listening to the response, he just taps the keyboard and ends the call. Pleased with himself, Bobby immediately begins chuckling, then punctuates the interaction with a satisfied, "Bitch."

The feed, almost like it's hungry for some premium Neo-Marxist sadness, switches to a webcam showing Cyndi and her possible-girlfriend, as they sit in front of their laptop, and assure each other, "That was a good

first step,” and, “I think we made our point,” and, “I’m sure they’ll contact us regarding the demands we made,” and, “I hope they couldn’t track this machine because otherwise, multiple high-powered rounds will almost certainly tear through both of our chests in the very near future.”

After a short pause, the sleeveless blogger-looking Neo-Marxist asks, “Are you sure we didn’t just eat shit on that call?”

“No. We didn’t,” Cyndi responds, then gradually loses confidence, “Probably- I think- All right, no need to panic.” She starts going through the pile of papers around her laptop, and she says, “We’ve always got phase two.”

“Wait, what’s phase two?” the fat Neo-Marxist asks, then adds, sounding offended, “You didn’t tell me there was a phase two.”

“We can defeat Proposition 69 by leaking the balcony footage, then pretending the government recorded the footage. It will be the biggest invasion of privacy story of all time, and we’ll change history. Boxer Santaros was watched just as closely by USIDent as we are, and here’s the footage to prove it. If Boxer- who married into Nana Mae’s family- isn’t safe from the omnipresent eye in the sky, who is?”

“But... how will we get money for it?” the fat Neo-Marxist asks.

“Ah, true. Good point. Throw out phase two. Let’s stick to the blackmail,” Cyndi says, immediately giving up on her world-changing revolution in favor of a large, hopefully-untraceable cash payout.

Capitalism wins again.

The feed switches to a camera inside the Hermosa Beach house that identifies everyone who passes inside. Fortunio is at the front door, with the type of nerves that Boxer usually displays, but we understand that a UPU2’s knock can have that effect on a guy like Fortunio.

“What’s the password?” Fortunio yells.

“Jerry Cocaine?” a voice- almost certainly Ronald Taverner’s- responds.

Fortunio opens the door, then immediately welcomes Ronald with an intricate handshake that Ronald can’t reciprocate. Like the slimy movie producer he is, Fortunio asks, “How ya doin’, man?” as the security system says, “Welcome UPU2 officer... Roland Taverner. Mr. Balducci, do not make any sudden movements, and comply with all requests made by UPU2 law enforcement.”

Not even acknowledging the fact that a system he pays for in order to protect him immediately treated him like a common criminal, Fortunio leads Ronald-as-Roland up the stairs to the living room.

The feed switches to the camera in the TV, as Ronald looks around the living room, and when he makes eye contact with Boxer, he turns to Fortunio, almost like he's asking if he should take Boxer on a date or shoot him. Clocking this vibe, Fortunio smiles wide, and asks, "When did ya get back from the desert?"

"Um, earlier this week. Yeah. I was on a yacht. With my parents," Ronald responds.

Fortunio nods, then says, "Parents love yachts, don't they?"

"Sure do," Ronald says, then his eyes return to Boxer.

Fortunio claps his hands together, and asks, "Boxer, Krysta, are we ready for the meeting?"

Krysta stands up, then makes her way around the sofa to greet her guest, the man who's been tasked with helping Boxer become Jericho Cane.

Ronald's eyes light up when he sees Krysta, and he says, "I feel like I know you, even though we've never met... like you're supplanted in my subconscious."

Krysta doesn't seem weirded out by this, and says, "I get that a lot. You stare at someone long enough, unblinking, dopamine firing in unrelenting bursts in your brain, and you tend to manifest a cosmic bond."

We see that Krysta is wearing the lensless eyeglasses she wore when she gave Boxer his 2008 rundown.

Ronald takes Krysta's delicate hand and shakes it, then the mountain of a man that is Boxer Santaros approaches, and says, "Hey! A real live UPU2!"

Boxer reaches out and shakes Ronald's hand with a certain amount of reverence, then he requests, "Come, sit." This is the first time we've seen Boxer take the lead in a social situation. Without memories or prolonged social interaction with strangers, *The Power* has become Boxer's world, and he's clearly excited to share it with someone who can enrich his understanding of all he knows. The end times is the *only* time for Boxer.

Ronald makes his way into the living room and sits on an ottoman in front of the fireplace, while Krysta sits on a sofa to his right, and Fortunio takes a seat on the sofa to his left. This gives Boxer center stage.

Not taking a seat, standing behind the sofa, Boxer closes his eyes for a moment, getting into character, then he declares, "The Power is an epic Los Angeles crime saga."

"That's... the name of your movie? The Power?" Ronald asks.

"Good detective work, Taverner," Fortunio mumbles.

"I'm also directing the film," Boxer reveals.

We can't see Ronald's face, but we presume he looks bored shitless already, because Boxer says, "It takes place in the near-future," in a way that he seems to believe will inspire intrigue.

"Right, the near-future" Ronald says, still not caring.

"Scientists are saying the future's going to be far more futuristic than they originally predicted," Krysta adds.

We look to Fortunio who dependably provides an expression that indicates he loves and hates how stupid Krysta sounds.

"The basic concept is this... I play-"

"-let me guess. A UPU2 officer," Ronald says, clearly trying to move this along.

"Exactly!" Boxer responds, then asks, "What's that stand for, UPU2?"

Ronald shrugs apathetically, and says, "Something about pussification, I think."

Krysta nods at this.

Boxer resumes his pitch, "I play a UPU2 officer who isn't who he seems. He's a fractured warrior who senses a change in the city."

"Oh yeah?" Ronald responds.

"Crime suddenly skyrockets for no apparent reason. The world is coming to an end. And he's the only one who can see the truth," Boxer explains, with the gravitas of a movie trailer narration.

"What's the truth?" Ronald asks.

Boxer nearly laughs, then says, "My character- he realizes that the apocalyptic crime rate is because of global deceleration causing an instability in the atmosphere. The rotation of the Earth is slowing down at a rate of point zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero, zero... six... miles per hour each day..." Krysta mouths these numbers as Boxer says them aloud, "...and this slowdown disrupts the chemical equilibrium in the human brain, causing very irrational criminal behavior."

"How do you stop the global deceleration?" Ronald asks, and with this question, he finally seems genuinely interested.



"Oh, we can't *stop it!* There is no stopping what can't be stopped!" Jericho declares.

"Seems pretty fucking pointless to even tell this story," Fortunio notes, and this man is a producer on the film.

Krysta hops in, "Only God... can stop it. But The New York Times said 'God is dead.' "

Fortunio seems confused regarding how Krysta acquired, and read, a copy of *The New York Times*, and he also seems reluctant to believe they made such a declaration. Maybe he just wants the mod squad out of his house so he's not adding any fuel to this fire.

Boxer suddenly gets very somber, and says, "As you can imagine, I try my damndest to stop the end of the world, and I do so by putting together a theory to save humanity with Dr. Muriel Fox, the oceanography disaster specialist-"

"-Astrophysicist!" Krysta interrupts with a shriek.

"The oceanography disaster specialist... sweetheart," Boxer says, trying to assert his authorial stamp on the screenplay.

"Roland, don't you think I should be an astrophysicist, instead of an oceanographer?" Krysta asks.

The entire room stares at Ronald-as-Roland, who stands up, and looks at Boxer, then flatly informs him, "You're going to have to wear a bulletproof vest."

This settles it, and the ride-along officially begins.

Krysta walks with Boxer to the door, and says, "You can take my cell phone, and here's your backpack and the camera. If you have any questions or if you feel unsure about anything, call me, and I'll come pick you up."

Boxer takes the items from Krysta, then kisses her on the top of her blonde wig.

Boxer and Ronald leave the house, and we're presented with a feed from Boxer's camera so it's unstable and doesn't give us much to go on. As they walk to the UPU2 cruiser, Pilot reads aloud from his Bible.

*"Revelation: 11 tells the tale of two witnesses who appear in Jerusalem to speak out against the sins of mankind. They are eventually killed by those tormented by their prophecies."*

"And these two guys are our witnesses?" we ask.

*"I honestly have no clue."*

Boxer sets the camera and his backpack on the trunk of the cruiser, then he's given his bulletproof vest.

The feed switches to the dashcam of the UPU2 cruiser. Ronald gets in the driver's seat, then Boxer sits shotgun, placing his backpack by his feet and his digital camcorder in his lap.

We see Ronald whisper, "Right is gas, left is break."

"What was that?" Boxer asks.

"What?" Ronald asks, eyes wide.

Boxer glances over with a curiosity, and asks, "What was your little mantra there?"

"I didn't say anything," Ronald maintains.

"You said 'Right is gas, the left will break.' Is that a political statement?" Boxer asks, desperate to make Jericho Cane a fully-realized character by getting into the head of a UPU2.

We know that this mantra is because Ronald was watching Zora drive, and he correlated her footwork to how the vehicle reacted. Instead of copping to the severe situation he's in, Ronald says, "That's sort of... you know, a UPU2 saying. The right demands commodities with value- like gasoline- while the left demands social commodities like being able to police their own communities. We remind ourselves that the right supports establishment, while the left will break under their own false belief that all people are intrinsically good."

"Man, you fucking hate Neo-Marxists, huh?" Boxer says.

"You bet your dad's dick I do," Ronald responds, then throws the cruiser in reverse and he backs out haphazardly.

We watch Boxer lift the camera, and square his frame for his footage, as Ronald focuses on his driving.

Once he likes his composition, Boxer removes a stack of index cards from his backpack, then puts on a pair of sunglasses. The actor begins his field-study, "Roland, let me ask you, what goes through your head when you sit behind the wheel, cruising the streets, digesting humanity? Is it a process of elimination? Each car that passes, the person inside... are they a mere suspect? Or are we all innocents..." Boxer looks down at a stack of index cards, then continues "...our chariots mere chess pieces waiting to be thrown from the gridlock and into the arms of the wolves?"

Staring straight at the center line, Ronald-as-Roland, says, "Well, I'd say we act like concerned citizens. We look at all the people, all the cars. We keep an eye out for any unusual or erratic behavior- speed changes or lane changes that seem unsafe."

"Yeah, but don't you think emotions come into play? Judgment calls, affected by whatever mood you're in on that particular day? Emotional responses based on your past arrests?" Boxer reads from the card.

"Well, there is one thing that's essential to the job," Ronald says, and we wonder if he'll deliver the lines that Zora gave him.

"I knew it," Boxer says, excited that he's getting to the core of the matter. "Tell me. Be honest."

"To be honest..." Ronald says, and there's a pause, before he goes for it and says, "...we're just looking out for the niggers."

In reaction to the N-bomb being dropped, Boxer takes off his sunglasses, then asks, "The niggers?"

"Yeah."

"They're everywhere," Ronald whispers ominously.

"You're joking," Boxer says.

"No, I'm not joking. You'll see them. There's one there," Ronald points at a passing Escalade.

It's quiet in the FluidKruiser for an extended moment, then a smile appears on Ronald's face, and he says, "I'm just fuckin' with you, man."

Boxer decides to let it slide, and says, "That's a funny joke," but it's clear in his tone he's not amused.

The feed clicks over to what appears to be a "video village" that Zora has set up with Bing in the side yard of a house we've never seen before.

Bing is working on DREAM and Dion's disguises, while Zora rollerblades around a stone walkway. They're watching the feed on two monitors that are getting a live-feed of Boxer's Fluid Karma enabled camera.

"Yes! He said 'nigger!'" Dion celebrates.

"But I don't think he said it with authority," DREAM mopes.

"That is a cracker in a UPU2 uniform saying nigger, the authority is oozing from that situation," Dion counters.

"He said it like how Ja Rule says it, and I didn't believe him as a racist. Fascist, maybe, but not a racist," DREAM declares.

Taken aback for the wrong reason, Dion puts his hand to his chest, as he asks, “Ja Rule strikes you as a fascist?”

“Yes, for starters, he had that song 'Always On Time,' which, probably, is about Mussolini's trains,” DREAM points out, and Dion accepts this with a shrug.

The feed hops back to the UPU2 cruiser dashcam.

Moving onto the next subject that he was supposed to bring up, Ronald asks, “So what does your wife think about your new girlfriend?”

“My wife?” Boxer asks, and we lean forward to watch Boxer's reaction.

“Yeah,” Ronald responds.

Boxer stays with his original reaction of contorting his face in complicated perturbation.

Ronald pushes forward, providing exposition in the form of casual conversation, “She cool with the fact that you have a pornstar girlfriend on the side?”

“I'm not married,” Boxer says, rejecting the idea outright.

“You're not?”

“No, I'm not,” Boxer responds, and he's more offended by this than the racial epithet that Ronald used.

“I could've sworn you were married to the daughter of Senator Bobby Frost.”

Boxer's eyes go wide, then he blinks hard. He begins to hiss out a stream of words, until Ronald looks over at him with a UPU2's deconstructing glare.

“I am *not* married. I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't know who your pal Frosty Bob is. I don't want to talk about this. Why are you asking questions? I want to talk about my movie,” Boxer says, and if he wasn't holding his camera, we bet he would be tapping his fingers.

“Okay,” Ronald relents, because he doesn't give a fuck about any of this, “Let's talk about your film. What's it really about?”

Boxer pauses, then locks into what Krysta probably coached him to say, “It all hinges on a top-secret experiment. A young couple comes home from the hospital with their newborn baby. A week goes by, and the baby still hasn't produced a bowel movement.” Boxer pauses his summary and looks to Ronald for a reaction.

“Maybe the baby's just constipated?” Ronald says, on edge.

"No, no, no, no. This is a very special baby. This baby processes energy differently," Boxer says, then waits for Ronald to ask the next question.

Ronald stares out the windshield, and he mentions, "I haven't had a bowel movement in as long as I can remember. I haven't taken a piss either."

Boxer's eyes go wide, and he admits, "After I discussed this part of the screenplay with Krysta, I too stopped having bowel movements."

The feed switches back to the makeshift video village, as Dion again dramatically reacts to the footage, and says, "The dude hasn't taken a shit in a week!"

"When has it ever been in the Bible that you have to have a bowel movement?" DREAM asks, and Pilot points at the screen as though this explains it away.

"It's not written anywhere. It's not written in the Bible, but some things are written, like, in Mother Nature," Dion points out, "All of the animals shit. Cows shit, Lamas shit."

"Do they like it? Do they want to? If they had a voice, would they rather not?" DREAM asks, realizing that she can make Boxer and Ronald not shitting an act of pure defiance against normalized thought.

"I think they feel better after they take a shit," Dion says, then pauses and reviews the topic further, before definitively declaring, "I think they do like it. My answer is 'Yes.'"

"My answer is no," DREAM responds, probably just to be difficult.

"Why?" Bing asks.

"They can't read. Have you ever taken a shit and had nothing to read? Makes you really focus on the act," DREAM says.

Dion is shaking his head, and he points at the monitor, then gets them back on track, "We're never going to agree on this so we've got to stop arguing because that UPU2 cruiser is gonna pull up here at any moment. They won't have to stop on the way for a bathroom break, which cuts down on the travel time so we gotta be ready."

"But how do they know to show up here? Like, Roland isn't a real UPU2 and Boxer has no idea what UPU2s do, besides overt-racism," DREAM points out.

"I told you to read the e-mails!" Dion responds.

"Zora changed the channel on Ronald's body mic so she's going to radio in a disturbance, then your performance begins," Bing reminds them, so

they'll shut the fuck up and let him put on their disguises, which, if the current work on Dion is any indication, will be just as racist as Ronald's act is.

Zora rollerblades around as Bing creates a caricature of a human's face atop a human face. As he works on Dion's comically wide nose, Bing says, "Guys, I love doing makeup, but are you sure we can—"

"—we need to stay in the moment and you're fucking with our process, Bing," DREAM immediately shuts him down.

"You know, I still don't see why facial prosthetics are necessary. That wasn't part of the plan," Zora says, skating by, intrigued by how poorly Bing's attempt to render human beings is going.

"I told you a million times, genius, Dion and I are cultural icons. We cannot afford to get recognized by the camera," DREAM says, with a sneer.

"Oh, that's right," Zora says, in faux-realization, "See, I didn't realize that your spoken-word poetry had captured the cultural zeitgeist of the nation."

"Yeah, well, at least I'm not a second-rate comedian, Zora. Just because it's loud doesn't mean it's funny," DREAM yells, and proves her own point.

"Ya know, once Bing makes you up, you might want to stick with those prosthetics— as garish as they look, they actually improve your appearance," Zora says, in a breathy near-whisper.

"Watch what you say, bitch. Sometimes a dream can become a nightmare on the drop of a dime," DREAM threatens Zora.

"Will you two just chill the fuck out? Go get those squib detonators ready; they're going to be here in under a half hour," Dion says— the one guy who seems to be able to understand what's about to occur.

"Hey, Bing, these off-road rollerblades were a great idea," Zora says, ignoring Dion's command.

"Thanks, Zora," Bing responds, sounding like a guy who is rarely on the receiving end of gratitude.

"Your personality is the human embodiment of rollerblades," DREAM informs Zora, continuing a fight we thought was over.

"I can't wait to see both of you get shot," Zora says, staring at DREAM and Dion, and it's quiet in the side yard video village after she says this.

The feed switches to Krysta's show, NOW, instead of back to the UPU2 cruiser, and for the first time, Krysta's image seems like an intrusion. This episode must have been pre-recorded, but it also appears to be extremely

recent because the tidal winds from the generator are causing everyone's hair to half cover their face, so the girls are tasked with both making a coherent statement, and also looking cute. There's an old joke about a blonde trying to walk while chewing bubble gum that comes to mind.

"It's always the nerds making legislation. It's never some man-babe like Pilot Abilene telling us what to do," is the first full statement we catch. We raise our hand, and Pilot gives us a high five.

"You'll be the next Reagan," we tell Pilot.

*"I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."*

"...he just wants to pour Bud Light on himself and our tits, while we all dance together. Why don't we just have him make the rules?" Krysta asks, presumably still talking about Pilot, and we have to wonder if maybe that billboard ad wasn't Photoshop.

Pilot is smiling at the screen, really loving Krysta's take, which makes us love it too, and we feel much less bitter about this intrusion of NOW.

"I agree. We need minds like his," Deena says, "Since he's seen and experienced the horrors of war firsthand, he can understand what it would feel like for each and every soldier he sent overseas."

"No, that's not why we need him. It's because of the dancing thing. Pay attention or you'll be voted off," Krysta scolds, introducing new show rules on the fly.

"Who made you queen of NOW?" Deena asks.

"I'm queen, and this is my court," Krysta says, pointing to Shoshana and Sheena.

"It's certainly not a supreme court," Deena counters, bitter she was left off it.

"Fuck the Supreme Court," Shoshana says, "They're just a bunch of dicks. It's like, who the fuck elected them anyway, right? I sure as fuck didn't vote for them. I mean, they're a bunch of supreme cunts? Don't tell me what to do with my body, right?"

"Only me, and my director," Sheena joins in.

"I have a question for the Supreme Court," Shoshana says.

"Oh no," we gasp.

"What happens when a woman has sex on a flight from London to Los Angeles, then takes the morning-after pill while flying across the time zone?"

Each girl reacts to this like their head is about to explode.

"I don't know," Deena admits.

"Then it becomes the morning-before pill," Shoshana says.

"You are a genius," Deena incorrectly declares.

"Holy shit. That is brilliant," Krysta seconds, treating this revelation like the information in her screenplay.

*"Deep shit, right?"*

This is our chance to mock the show with Pilot, but instead, we zone out and focus on this stupid observation Shoshana incorrectly made in what we hope was a joke. The reason why we can't get past it is that it reminds us of Krysta discussing being on that plane- the light, Muriel, the fall.

*"Hey, is the rift affecting you?"*

We look over to Pilot, flash a quick smile, then say, "Nah. Just... thinking."

*"Tell me."*

"It's dumb."

*"We're treating a screenplay about a baby who farts earthquakes as gospel, tell me what you're thinking."*

"Shoshana mentioned the whole air travel thing, and Krysta was in that plane when she gained her power for clairvoyance. Let's say there was some sort of time delineation while on the plane... if she had somehow traveled forward in time, she would be able to gain knowledge of the future. For example, you had certain knowledge when you drove here today, but when you drive home tonight, you will effortlessly have this entire day's worth of info in your mind. If the version of you who drove here this morning suddenly had an identical brain to the you who will be driving home tonight, then would you think you're clairvoyant?"

*"I get ya. Right now, in your mind, you have knowledge that the you of three weeks ago did not have. The you from three weeks ago, and the now-you look exactly the same- just the information you possess would be different. You would have knowledge of the future, but that power would have an end date, and the fault would be that the future information you have is subject to changes that occur in the present."*

"Exactly. Krysta's ability to tell the future is going to stop the moment she hits the wall in her knowledge. That wall... most likely, is when the rift opens so wide it begins to pull Earth 1 toward Earth 2. Then... what?"



*"Then worlds collide."*

We have to wonder if something like this happened to Krysta Now. Maybe, it was not just a contraceptive related confusion, but also a greater understanding of how the Krysta who boarded that plane had certain information about the world, and the Krysta who was given a military escort off the plane knew so much more. We feel like we're finally making breakthroughs today, so we focus on the feed which has returned to the POV sunglasses cam of Bobby Frost. He's in the back of a FluidKar, likely headed to the Utopia 3 facility for his tour.

We catch him in mid-warning, "... so, Nana Mae, don't do anything drastic. At least wait until the Republican primary is over. Don't let your system come off looking even more sinister than it is. Don't give them what they want."

"We're going to solidify this primary win," we hear Nana Mae declare definitively.

"How exactly do you plan on doing that?" Bobby asks.

"We're going to raid the local Neo-Marxist headquarters," Nana Mae says, and we gasp.

"Oh really? You have a warrant for that?" Bobby asks, rightfully combative.

"No. But I have you goin' there today."

"I'm not going to perform the raid," Bobby says.

"You don't have to. That's dangerous. You need to be kept safe... so obviously the raid will be to protect you," Nana Mae purrs.

"Am I in danger?" Bobby asks, and as the perspective of the feed lowers, we realize that Bobby is ducking an unseen villain outside the window of the Town Car.

"No, dear. Follow along with me here. You're headed to Utopia 3; the Neo-Marxist compound is near Utopia 3; the Neo-Marxists don't want us to win the election; the Neo-Marxists will be raided because of a call we received about a threat to your safety."

"You received a call?" Bobby asks, with a panic in his voice indicating that he believes it's possible Deepthroat Two might have traveled the miles they needed to go before they slept.

"No. *You* received a call," Nana Mae corrects him.

"... how did I handle it?" Bobby asks, trying to piece all this together.

"The Deepthroat Two call, Bobby! Come on. Look alive! You heard that they were using a voice scrambler. That's good for preserving their identity, but it also becomes a M.O."

"Rightttt," Bobby says, not following the sinister implications of Nana Mae's statement.

"That stands for 'modus operandi,'" Nana Mae clues him in, likely because there's a chance Bobby thought "M.O." was slang used to identify a homosexual.

We have to wonder where the men in the Southland would be without their women.

"Ohhh, so you're going to receive a call from a 'mole' in the Neo-Marxist compound, with the voice changer on their voice, and it's going to be regarding a threat to my safety, then we're going to use this audio as the rationale for raiding the compound," Bobby says, piecing it all together.

"Good boy!" Nana Mae says, treating Bobby like a white-haired dog that just learned a new trick. There's a pause on the line, then Nana Mae asks, "So what do you think?"

"I think it's going to be a lot of fun watching a UPU3 do a no-knock on that squatters paradise," Bobby says, and for the first time, the Frosts seem like a married couple who are having fun, together, even when they're apart.

The feed hops back to the dashcam of Boxer and Ronald on patrol. Their FluidKruiser is backed into a parking spot by the beach. We're impressed that Ronald knew how to put the car in reverse to get into this spot.

For a second we think they're both high on Liquid Karma, because they're staring into the camera, but then their focus shifts to Ronald's left, and Ronald says, out of an open window, "Don't forget the suntan lotion, mam. Gotta stay safe out there," then they both turn so they're facing the back window of the cruiser that frames a beautiful blonde girl carrying a black umbrella out to the beach.

It's finally here- that iconography that brought us all this way is now being waved like a black flag.

"Is that one of the girls that Krysta does her show with?" Ronald asks.

"You watch Krysta's show?" Boxer responds, and he makes sure he's filming this conversation for Krysta because she'll dig it.

"I saw a clip of it. My friend Zora was watching it," Ronald says simply.

“What does Zora think of the show?” Boxer asks.

“She likes it.. but she had sniffed a lot of spray paint while watching it so she could've been staring at a wall and probably would've been riveted.”

Over Ronald's radio, a man's voice says, “45433 Vermont, South Central. Shots fired. Reports of a black man dressed in a red jacket fleeing the scene.”

Boxer excitedly responds, “Finally. Something is happening!”

“Something is always happening,” Ronald reminds him.

There's a beat where Boxer looks ready for Ronald to flip on the lights and the siren, but Ronald sort of just sits there, then checks over his shoulder for the blonde.

“Aren't you going to radio back to say we're headed to the scene?” Boxer asks.

“No, we're not headed to the scene. That sounds fucking terrible,” Ronald states, then shakes his head.

“Someone was shot,” Boxer responds.

“Thanks for making my point for me.”

A cell phone begins ringing and Boxer looks at Ronald's belt, then asks, “Are you going to get that?”

“Huh?” Ronald responds, confused, then he looks down and realizes there's a cell phone on his hip that's going off.

“You don't mind, do you?” Ronald asks, trying to play it off like he was being respectful when he didn't reach for it.

“No, by all means,” Boxer says, but he keeps filming.

Ronald takes the phone off his belt, then answers it on speaker, “Hello?”

“Hi, Roland! I know I'm not supposed to call you when you're out and about on your rounds, but I wanted to see how things are going, and we haven't chatted in a while,” a woman's brightly-positive voice says.

“Oh, right. It's not a problem,” Ronald responds, then smirks at the camera.

“I was just thinking about you because I was at the grocery store and I saw Mrs. Bruno and she was so impressed when I told her my son grew up to be a war hero.”

“Oh, who's your son?” Ronald asks.

The woman on the other end of the phone laughs at this, and says, “I don't care what you say, you're a hero for merely going into battle.”

Anything that happened while you were there was war. They sent you into a battle, and no one should be surprised that someone got hurt.”

Ronald, for the first time on the ride-along, outwardly shows emotion, and it's such a complex expression that Boxer is totally focused on capturing it, so he can duplicate it in the future.

After a pause on the line, the woman- presumably Mrs. Taverner- says, “I'm sorry I called you. I just wanted to-”

“-don't apologize,” Ronald says, with force.

Another silence crackles on the line for a moment, then Mrs. Taverner seems to gain the confidence to ask, “Roland, would you like to come for dinner tonight?”

Boxer captures Ronald's smile on camera, and he says, “Yeah. Yeah, I would. I'll pick you up, and we can go somewhere nice.”

“After choir practice, you can give me a ride home from church,” the woman who must be Ms. Taverner says.

“Which street should I park on? I'll be in the UPU2 cruiser so I can park literally anywhere,” Ronald says.

“California Ave,” the woman says, then adds, “725.”

“I'll see you there... when choir gets out at... 6 PM?” Ronald responds.

“Actually, we go until 8 so it will be a late dinner... I'm so excited to see you, Roland.”

Ronald winces, then asks, “Should I bring Ronald?”

“Is that your partner on the force? You won't be on duty, will you?” Mrs. Taverner asks.

“No. I was just asking if I should bring a friend because, you know, I'm not much of a talker lately.”

“Just you is enough,” Mrs. Taverner assures him warmly, then they exchange goodbyes.

“Was that your mom?” Boxer asks.

“Yeah,” Ronald exhales, “My mom.”

“Everything okay?”

“I need some fresh air,” Ronald says, then he gets out of the car.

Moving fast, Boxer clips a wireless mic to his hoodie, then puts his camera on the dash, facing toward the back window, and he leaves the car to chase down Ronald.

“Put your hood up, you'll attract attention,” Ronald demands, not looking back at Boxer, but instead facing the ocean.

"You're right," Boxer says, then slides up the hood on his green hoodie. The two men remain outside of the cruiser, framed in the back window, staring at the ocean, and Boxer, in an effort to steal real pain and repurpose it into his character, asks, "You have a complicated relationship with your mom, huh?"

Ronald leans forward and puts his hands on his knees.

Clearly understanding that he needs to be there for Ronald, instead of just studying him, Boxer asks, "Do you ever feel like there are a thousand people... locked inside of you?"

Ronald nods his head at this, confirming, "Yeah. I do."

"But it's your memory that keeps them glued together- that keeps all those people from... fighting one another," Boxer says, like he's still working this all out. "Maybe, in the end, that's all we have." Boxer presses his finger to his hood, "The memory gospel."

"The memory gospel," Ronald repeats. "What if your memory gospel has pages torn out?"

Boxer bows his head, then says, "You can always write new ones, as long as you make sure they're true."

"I no longer know what's true," Ronald admits, standing up.

The camera sitting on the dash captures a striking scene, as Boxer looks at Ronald with both pity and empathy. They turn away from each other, and look out to the mighty ocean.

"I know something that can help you, but if you do it, it will put your job in jeopardy," Boxer finally says.

Not as a question, Ronald responds, "Liquid Karma."

"Yeah... come on... I'll give you a syringe."

Boxer and Ronald return to the cruiser, and the feed switches back to the dashcam. Boxer starts to rifle through his backpack, while Pilot takes his eyes off the screen and looks back into the scope of his rifle.

*"You hear the commotion below?"*

"Yeah, the increase in erratic behavior of normally sane people sure is comforting," we snark.

*"That commotion is because Bobby Frost is about to board a speedboat out to Utopia 3."*

"If the Secret Service had to make sure the trip was safe, how come no one came up here and vetted the random civilian that appeared?"

*"Because they trust me to do what's right for the country,  
and in this case, it's making sure nothing happens to  
Bobby Frost."*

Pilot's confidence in his standing with a government who can't be trusted makes us feel like we're too paranoid so we focus on the screen to be reminded that we're not nearly paranoid enough.

Boxer raises a Treer syringe between himself and Ronald. He presses on its edge, and the LEDs dance before settling on red.

"My favorite color," Ronald says, admiring the syringe.

"The arm or the neck?" Boxer asks.

"Neck," Ronald says, leaning back, closing his eyes, then Boxer injects his ride-along partner. As he does this, two surfers walk past the cruiser, obviously confused by the image of their favorite actor drugging a UPU2 in broad daylight.

"What the fuck are you doing, dude?" is the question one of the surfers can't help but ask.

Since he's a man on the run, Boxer immediately puts the used syringe into his backpack, then gets out of the cruiser, and flees, hood up.

The dashcam remains fixed on Ronald, eyes wide, but we can hear Boxer because he never took off his mic. Between the swishes of fast movement away from the cruiser and the surfers, we hear Boxer whispering to himself with hushed, lightning-fast intensity.

We saw Ronald Taverner's humanity when he received that call on his cell, and now we watch as the humanity has been drained from him. The man Boxer was supposed to emulate now looks exactly like Boxer did in the darkest and saddest moments of this footage. Two different men have both sported an identical look on their face- it's the face of escape. This is how a generation will cope, in the aftermath, if there is an aftermath.

Finally, the feed switches to an external security camera as Boxer approaches what might be a bookstore. His sprint stops, as he locks eyes with a familiar face. In the far left corner of the frame, standing in front of a wall covered in Neo-Marxist posters, is Serpentine, in a cleavage-baring dress.

Serpentine nods at Boxer, like she had been waiting for him, then she walks over to the door to the bookstore and pulls it open. Boxer steps inside the bookstore, then Serpentine follows him.

From the security dome cameras, we see Serpentine lead Boxer past the fat softball player woman who's the Robin to Cyndi Pinziki's Batman. This lady is working the register, and she doesn't look up as they pass her. This is the customer service of socialism. Everyone is treated equally- like garbage.

Serpentine snakes through the aisles of bookshelves until they reach the back center of the store.

Boxer pulls off his hood and stares at a group of people that, just like Serpentine, seem to be expecting him.

In front of a scale model of the Santa Monica Pier from the 20's, is Inga von Westphalen, then next to her there's a woman that we've never seen before- not on this screen, nor in real-life. The woman is... a midget. A creepy midget. The simple fact that she's a midget doesn't make her creepy- even if she was scaled up to Inga's size, this lady would still give us the heebie-jeebies.

"He is a fine specimen, a divine specimen," Inga says, which is also creepy.

Boxer, through his confusion, flashes her a smile that looks like a facial tick- because a compliment is an actor's best friend, and because, for a moment, eighty years ago, Inga von Westphalen and Boxer Santaros sat on the edge of the pier and admired God's greatest creation.

"Whatever happens next will be no fault of your own," Serpentine tells Boxer.

With an airy voice, the creepy midget says, "We have read your screenplay. The Power." She holds out a bound copy of the script.

"Are you Krysta's manager?" Boxer questions, then muses, "When she said she was managed by a bunch of trolls, I didn't think she meant it literally."

The creepy midget shakes her head no. Boxer reaches for his screenplay- a top-secret document- and he has to wrestle it away from the midget, which looks harder than one would imagine. Once he has it pried from her little sausage fingers, Boxer cradles the script like it's Caleb, and asks, "How did you get a copy of my screenplay?"

"Don't look so scared, Mistah Santaros. Da future is just like you imagined," Serpentine assures him, her words riding on a cloud of smoke.

Inga looks at Boxer, and with her German accent comically overstated, she says, "This is the way the world ends. Not with a whimper..."

“...but with a bang,” the midget says, and her hissing apocalyptic declarations are not doing her vibe any favors.

“Are you producers? Did I work with you on those movies about naughty mummies?” Boxer asks, indicating that Krysta must have shown Boxer his IMDB page, merely to ground his identity and stave off his own independent search.

“We would like you to join us... in the sky?” the midget says, at first as a statement, but by the end, it’s a question.

“Like... as in... heaven?” Boxer asks, dropping the script to the ground so he can tent his fingers and tap their tips together.

“Like... as in... the Jenny von Westphalen,” Inga says.

“Is that a yoga studio?” Boxer asks, since his most substantial reference for the world is California.

“It’s a mega-zeppelin. We require you and Krysta to perform on da first flight of da Jenny von Westphalen,” Serpentine explains.

“Oh, trust me, it’s not like you see in pornos. There’s a lot of repositioning that’s cut out. Really, you don’t want to watch it live. It would be like walking in on Mickey Mouse in the bathroom. All the magic would be gone, forever.”

“We want you to perform a dance,” Serpentine says.

“Oh, Krysta doesn’t do that anymore. She retired after her last performance at Wild Bill’s. She’s completely faithful to me, except for when she does the occasional blowbang.”

“You have questions, and we will provide you answers if you arrive at the Treer mega-zeppelin at 8 PM on July 4th,” Inga says.

Boxer nods at this, and seems receptive to it- maybe because, at the end of his script, he doesn’t save the world. Maybe, it’s time for a rewrite.

The feed switches to the first-person view of someone exiting the back of a van. At first, we think it’s Walter, wearing a similar pair of the glasses that Bobby Frost has, but when the POV turns back toward the van, we see that there are UPU3 officers hopping out, guns drawn.

The group of UPU3 splits into two, and our cameraman heads toward the compound, one man behind the lead. “Grid nine zero two nine one,” plays in an electronic voice from a speaker on his gun, as the UPU3s clomp up a ramp, passing a mural of the solar system.

In a cluster of six officers, the UPU3s rush up an external staircase, to a locked door. The UPU3 in front of the cameraman places something next to



the handle of the door, then everyone steps back. The item doesn't cause a blast like we thought it would- it merely makes a clicking noise, then we hear a digital blip and the door pops open. We now understand that they weren't stepping back to shield themselves from blast-debris, they were stepping back just in case a Neo-Marxist guard heard the digital lock-pick and burst outside to impede the raid. For the first time, we notice that the lead UPU3 has a rifle with a swiveling barrel that can shoot around corners, and he uses his sight to confirm the entryway is clear. Once he's confident in their relative safety, he clicks the barrel back into place, then leads the formation inside the compound.

We watch this in POV as the UPU3s climb a staircase wallpapered with propaganda posters.

We see there's a man at the top of the staircase, talking on a cell phone, and we hear Nana Mae's voice intrude on the feed to provide the authorization to, "Fire at will."

The moment the shot is fired, striking the man on the phone somewhere in the upper-body, the feed switches to the surveillance camera deep inside the compound, which faces the loft where Roland has been left incapacitated. We appreciate this change, because we don't want to watch a series of government-sponsored murders. Unfortunately, even though we don't have to watch it, we can still hear it... the fully-automatic pops of twenty-somethings being unfairly killed. It's louder than we thought it would be, and this noise is even enough to wake Roland Taverner from his FluidKoma. He goes from bleeding through time, to an Operation: Iraqi Freedom flashback. His soldier-instincts kick in and he searches his hip for a weapon, then his chest for a sidearm, but when he confirms he's unarmed, he begins looking for an exit. Instead of climbing down from the loft, he decides to open a high perimeter sunlight window that, hopefully, leads out onto the roof.

Despite his unsure and wobbly navigation, Roland manages to get the window open, and hoist himself out of the compound. The feed switches to a rifle sight that follows Ronald's exit onto a flat roof, above the chaos, below the rift. Pilot watches this, and he doesn't look away. This confirms to us that we won't see this camera feed jitter as a round is released into Roland's skull. The rifle sight tracks Roland as he runs past the A/C units instead of hiding behind one of them. He's raided a building before- he seems to know it's not just a grown-up version of hide-and-go-seek.

Since holding onto a weak hope that he won't be noticed isn't in the cards, there's one option left at Roland's disposal- escape- but we can see from the elevated location of this voyeur gunman that the Neo-Marxist compound isn't within jumping distance of any other buildings- it is the creepy midget amongst the Ingianian and Serpentinian buildings around it. We have no audio on this feed, but we see Roland looking back to the compound in a panic, so we know that at least one UPU3 is climbing up to the loft.

With nowhere else to go, Roland gets up on the far ledge of the roof, then probes the air for balance. After looking back toward the window he climbed out of, we can only assume he's staring down a barrel, because he proceeds to stretch out his arms cruciform, then he allows himself to fall backward. With the overhead satellite view, we already know that there's a dumpster that he's falling into, but the way that Roland chose to fall is what makes us fearful for his survival.

Ass first, Ronald soundlessly lands in the dumpster, then the lid slams down, covering him, and before a UPU3 appears on the roof, the feed cuts to network TV footage of the Frost rally that's happening at Utopia 3.

At the podium, Bobby Frost, in a red tie and blue suit, declares, "I want to assure the American people that the Eliot/Frost campaign strongly believes that Fluid Karma is our future, despite the fact that so many people are creating these fictions about climate change."

From the audience, we hear a woman yell, "Scientists are saying that the Earth is slowing down because of the Fluid Karma in the atmosphere."

"I bet they aren't American scientists. I bet they're bitter British scientists," Bobby declares, "Maybe those Brits should spend less time worrying about what we're doing, and more time on making sure they pack their tea in waterproof containers because another American party is about to pop off whether they RSVP or not."

"The British are our allies in the war on terror," a man in the crowd yells out.

"Until they want our Fluid Karma," Bobby responds back immediately.

"If you're so sure that Fluid Karma is the green solution, why would you keep it for America, instead of spreading it to everyone and saving the planet?" a shrill woman asks.

Bobby shrugs, then says, "In the future, we might discuss licensing the technology. Hideo Takehashi is supposed to be traveling to the Southland

to discuss the license very soon actually. After the meeting, I'm sure he'll have a lot to say about whether or not the east should have access to Fluid Karma."

The onslaught continues as a woman screams, "How can you be so stringent with Fluid Karma's borders, but not with our own? My parents were murdered in the 4th of July attacks because people like you allowed terrorists to use Mexico as a pass-through to attack us!"

Bobby becomes presidentially serious, as he says, "First, I will tell you I'm so very sorry for your loss, and second I will tell you that for the Eliot/Frost ticket, national security will always be our top priority, which is why initiatives like Prop69 are valuable to this community, in order to prevent July 4<sup>th</sup> from ever happening again."

This causes a grumble in the crowd, and at first Bobby seems perturbed that they don't want secure borders, but then he clocks what threw them off, and he specifies, "Well, I mean, the BBQs and fireworks and parades will still happen, but the sad parts of July 4th will not happen again."

Two audience members, who must be Neo-Marxists, break out chanting, "*When will we be free, of this big brother so-ciety? Vote no on 69, save the world from sanctioned swine.*"

Bobby looks at them with pity, and says, "*Save the chant, don't be sad you lost. Cuz you still have time to vote Eliot/Frost.*" Bobby chuckles at his own rhyme, flashes the double peace sign, then is whisked away by security.

The crowd applauds, except for the Neo-Marxists who continue to chant, as approximately zero people join in.

The feed remains on whatever channel was showing this press conference, and a bunch of talking heads begin to debate if Bobby Frost was appropriating protest culture by utilizing a rhyme scheme to end the presser. A bald black guy says, "What you just saw is how they stole rock and roll from us."

Unable to deal with the furious screaming regarding pointless matters, we turn to Pilot, and rewind for a moment, "Why isn't this cable channel reporting on the whole politically-motivated civil-rights-violating raid that's very loudly going on right now?"

*"Because it's easier to argue with each other."*

We nod at this, then ask our next question, "Was getting Roland part of the raid?"

*"No. He's still in the dumpster right now."*

"But what if someone reported seeing him with Ronald?"

*"Then they would show up at the site where he was seen with Ronald, and they would find him, bleeding through time."*

"So the raid was all about..."

*"Remember when we saw Cyndi and that sack of yuck masquerading as a woman making calls to Bobby?"*

"Sure."

*"Do you also recall what you asked me about what they had on ice there?"*

"Human fingers."

*"There are thousands of thumbs there. Thousands of fake votes. That was part of what forced this second primary into being."*

"But the way she got them..."

*"If a legally protected tree is cut down in the forest and the press isn't there to see it, will the people who cut down this tree be brought up on charges?"*

"This is dangerous. What if the finger thing was a rumor, and she found nothing, after killing multiple people? She can just plant fake fingers to cover her ass."

*"You saw the fingers."*

"But in the future..."

*"What future?"*

It's silent on the turret; we dwell in darkness, as the sun attempts to reach us. There's something very sad about Pilot becoming just accepting what's going on in our country.

In an effort to not sound like a chanting Neo-Marxist, we relent on our argument and turn to the screen, and the feed has returned to the dashcam of the UPU2 cruiser. Boxer is no longer in the bookstore. He's now leaning over, listening to Ronald's UPU2 radio blaring, "Dispatch to Officer Taverner, do you copy?"

"Ronald, you need to respond. They're calling you," Boxer says, wide eyed in a different way than the UPU2 next to him.

"Dispatch to Officer Taverner, do you copy?" the radio squawks again.

Boxer reaches down and grabs Ronald's hand, then tells him, "The world needs you. Wake up." With this strong grip on his hand, Ronald snaps back to reality, then tries to zero in on the garbled noise of a dispatcher screeching over the audio on the feed.

"You have a call on your radio, Officer Roland Taverner," Boxer says, helping Ronald get his bearings.

Again the radio squawks, "Dispatch to Officer Taverner. Please respond!"

"They need you. They need *us*," Boxer says- the action hero giving his ride-along partner a needed call-to-action. "I'm not as brave as you are so you need to respond, and I'll be right behind you," Boxer says, releasing Ronald, confident that he's no longer bleeding through time.

Ronald grabs the radio off his shoulder, and says, "Officer Taverner here. Sorry about that, Dispatch."

"We have a possible domestic disturbance at 1400 Nowita Place," the radio responds, and predictably, we recognize the voice, because Zora is faking this call, just as Nana Mae faked a call to raid Zora's compound while she was out.

Ronald turns the key and the cruiser revs, then Zora impatiently radios, "Do you copy?"

"Copy that. En route," Ronald says, then throws the cruiser into drive and screeches out of the parking spot.

"We getting called into some shit?" Boxer asks.

"Sure are," Ronald says, throwing the lights and siren on, gunning the engine out of the lot.

We can see how fast and erratic Ronald's driving is, because he's leaving a wake of bums and bloodied tourists looking to the cruiser in flustered perplexity.

Boxer puts his hood up again, then his hands shoot up, and his fingertips tap each other. "If you'd like to pull over, I'll drive," he casually offers.

"No thanks," Ronald responds, as the cruiser appears to have blown through a red light.

While he ravages the road with reckless abandon, Ronald mentions, "While I was on the Liquid Karma, I had this dream, but it was like a *deja vu*."

Boxer's eyes remain wide as he taps his fingers.

"So, get this, I wake up in this maze," Ronald continues, and for a moment, it seems like he's still high on Liquid Karma. "The walls are made of sand, and as I slowly navigate through this puzzle, approaching a light source at the end..."

Boxer's eyes dash between the road and Ronald.

"...guess who's standing there, waiting for me..."

"Who?" Boxer asks.

"You," Ronald says, looking over at his scared passenger.

"Did we speak to each other in the dream?" Boxer asks, clearly sensing this connection as well.

"Yeah, you asked me how I got in the sand maze, and I told you it was through a rift in the space-time continuum."

"I've gone through a rift like that before," Boxer admits.

"You tell me that in the dream as well. So we're in the maze, and we're both saying we want to go home, then we start going through theories of how we'll escape. While we're shootin' the shit, we keep agreeing that if, on the next turn, there's no sign of freedom, we'll stop walking, and deal with the situation we're in. There's never really a point where we stop though- we keep walking- passing the same shit over and over, occasionally hitting a dead end."

"And it goes like that until you wake up?" Boxer asks.

"No, eventually you turn to me, and say, 'I think one of us has to die so the other can have freedom.'"

"I wouldn't say that," Boxer immediately tells Ronald.

"Well, you said it to me. And when I heard it, I felt kinda fucked up by this, understandably, so I suggested, 'Maybe you could try to boost me over the sand wall before you try to snap my neck,' but you shook your head, and you were like, 'I was riding this roller coaster, and I bled through time. I showed up at a time where America belonged to the Native Americans, and I was there, trapped in that time, until I was shot by one of their arrows, then I was booted out. I traveled back through the rift.'"

"That happened," Boxer confirms.

"So that part *does* sound like something you'd say?" Ronald asks, shooting him a good-natured smile.

Boxer nods, but he can't return the smile, because Ronald's driving doesn't seem to be improving.

“At this point in the dream, I asked you which one of us had to die, and you responded that it had to be me, which forced me to ask why, and you said, ‘When the victims become the aggressor the rift will close.’”

“But how am I the victim? How are you the aggressor?” Boxer asks.

“You were wearing a green hoodie with the hood up, and I was wearing this UPU2 uniform,” Ronald reveals.

This seems to hit Boxer like a ton of bricks, and he realizes, “The meek shall inherit the Earth.”

Ronald nods, then says, “First the LAPD- and now the UPU2- have imposed their will over the populace of LA for decades.”

“Jericho Cane is a UPU2, and Jericho Cane is the antithesis of meek,” Boxer’s voice booms, accepting that Boxer Santaros is a civilian, but Jericho Cane is a UPU2, with the power.

It’s Boxer Santaros in that maze because Ronald sees him in the hoodie.

The feed hops to a professional looking two-shot of the heavily made-up duo of DREAM and Dion. DREAM is in a white wedding dress, her hair is hidden under a red wig, and she has a prosthetic beak-nose. Dion is in a white dress shirt and black pants, and he’s wearing an awful sky blue vest with a matching bow tie.

The couple is standing in a living room, where all the furniture is covered in plastic and every possession in the house is boxed up, except for an uncut wedding cake which is placed between the terrifying couple. On the back wall, is a string-letter sign that reads J-U-S-T-M-A-R-R-I-E-D to really hammer home the theme.

We seem to have caught them in a pre-performance yoga-slash-improv game led by DREAM, who, eyes closed, chants, “Transform. Breathe. Dream.”

“Someone catch that chicken!” Dion screams suddenly, then DREAM tucks her hands under her armpits and begins flapping her arms. DION watches her, while adopting a Southern accent to say, “Hey! I’m farmer Dan. What are you chicken fucker chickens doing?!”

DREAM clucks like a chicken.

Dion karate chops his hand horizontally through the air, then says, “...andddd scene.”

Both improv-ers stand with their posture straight, then they do a vocal exercise about the tip of their tongue and their teeth. Dion has trouble with this, primarily due to the fact he has massive buck-tooth dentures in.

Once the exercise is over, DREAM asks, "Okay, babe. Are you ready?"

"Yeah- wait, actually, your disguise looks really good and all, but why are we wearing disguises if we're supposed to spark a revolution due to the fact that America's beloved tantric-sex improv duo is dead?"

"Oh," DREAM squeaks out, then her mouth opens like she's going to respond, but words never come. She tries to think it through, but she can't find an answer. "I guess, like, if we appear on this video as people no one knows, then we can still gig even after we're supposed to be dead."

"Yeah, true. I heard that we might get up to \$44 for our Sunday improv show," Dion responds hopefully.

Both performers go silent, then Dion turns on his heels, and, unprovoked, begins screaming through his giant teeth, "Did you fuck him?"

DREAM is instantly in character, and she yells back, "Yeah, I fucked him! I gave him an unrequested rimjob!"

"Oh, you liked it?" Dion asks, furious.

"I fucking loved it! He seemingly didn't even receive pleasure from it. The rimjob was just for me!"

"Ohhh, you bitch!" Dion yells, strangling the air.

"I fucked your brother last night, too! I'll fuck him again in front of you! And your mother also loved him more," DREAM ups the ante.

Dion lifts his right pointer finger, then says, "You a slut!"

"Don't point your finger at me!"

"Bitch, I'll kill you!"

"You kill me, I'll get the cops out here so fast!"

"How? How? How?" Dion chants, "You're going to be dead!"

"I know people!"

"I hate you! I fucking hate you!" Dion gasps, then he scolds himself, "Don't marry a ho. You can't make one a housewife. You can't," and we file this advice away, so we don't end up sounding like Dion in the future.

"I don't want to be a fucking housewife!" DREAM screams, "I like to suck impotent dicks! That's what *I* like to do."

Upon hearing this, Dion begins boxing the air.

The feed mercifully jumps away from this display of worthless improv, to footage being shot by Boxer's Fluid Karma-enabled camera. The quality of what we're seeing is a pure HD, with barely any artifacting, and we begin to wonder just how powerful the energy fields have become. What if the



only reason we aren't using Utopia 3 to send out WiFi is that it's currently a channel that the USIDeath is exclusively occupying to transfer data?

Ronald's cruiser comes to an abrupt stop, and an electronic voice announces, "Grid nine zero two nine one. Oakwood Avenue." This wasn't where Zora said for them to go, so it seems Boxer and Ronald will have to approach on foot. We can faintly hear DREAM screaming so we know they're close to Nowita Place.

Before Boxer or Ronald get out of the cruiser, another UPU2 vehicle pulls up to Ronald's window.

"Oh, look, a fellow officer of the law," Boxer says warmly, framing up the entire interaction in his camera.

"Howdy," the UPU2 officer in the other cruiser says, but any cheeriness this statement normally carries is lost in a gravely delivery. This random UPU2 officer is a chubby man with a deep tan, and white-blond hair. His eyes are obscured by wrap-around black sunglasses, but something about this guy is vaguely familiar to us.

"That's the UPU2 Zora is fucking, right?" we ask, "Is this Operation: Firework."

Pilot nods at this, but we don't feel any better about what Boxer and Roland are about to walk into.

We watch the screen as the white-haired UPU2 officer looks at his dash, then back at Ronald, and hisses, "Hermosa Beach. Little bit out of your jurisdiction, don't you think?"

"Well, there is no jurisdiction. We're all UPU2 now," Ronald says, and he's probably making this shit up, but we aren't sure.

"We have a possible domestic disturbance at 1400 Nowita Place," we hear Boxer say.

The UPU2 officer takes off his sunglasses, then growls, "Boxer Santaros?"

"Good evening, officer. I'm researching my movie by doing a ride-along," Boxer replies, then holds up his camera, but he quickly lowers it again when he realizes he's messing up his framing.

Muffled sounds of DREAM and Dion's fight fill in an awkward silence, and in a throaty, gritty voice, the UPU2 says, "Sounds like you could use a little backup."

Boxer shakes the camera yes, while Ronald has the opposite reaction, and says, "I think we can handle this."

"No," the white-haired UPU2 officer states definitively. "I think you could use a little backup," he informs Roland, then speeds forward, and parks on the opposite side of the street.

Boxer quickly gets out of the cruiser, then frames up a shot that shows both officers preparing to intervene on a possible hostile scene.

We expect to see Ronald mimicking the white-haired UPU2's moves, but instead, he seems to be watching them with a distrust.

When it comes time to cut through yards, to get to Nowita, Ronald allows the white-haired UPU2 to lead the way.

"What's with the fog?" Boxer asks, camera raised, bringing up the rear of the three-man raid.

"Tidal generator," the UPU2 growls out.

In a cloudy haze, we pass bushes with flags inserted in them- a patriotic perimeter to the violence happening within these houses. The Tidal Generator's smog gives everything an eerie other-worldliness.

While we pass through an overgrown side yard, we catch glimpses of Ronald's profile, and he looks scared- maybe because he doesn't want to face Dion and DREAM, maybe because he isn't sure what this real UPU2 is doing here, or maybe because he realizes he'll have to watch DREAM and Dion perform improv.

Nowita must run parallel with the road that the cruisers are parked on because the path through the yards has Boxer and the UPU2s facing the set of Dream and Dion's latest performance. Somehow, this moment feels even worse than we expected. A statement DREAM previously leveraged against Zora- "Just because it's loud, doesn't mean it's funny," repeats in our mind.

"No, you bitch!" we hear Dion yell.

"Fuck you!" is DREAM's incredible improv response, "Don't call me a bitch!"

"That's what I called you, bitch!" Dion counters.

DREAM matches his terribleness, then takes it to the next level with, "His dick was 200 inches long! You can't get your wiener past a foot! Pathetic!"

We desperately want to leave the turret and go to dinner, but we stay, as Dion screams, "You can't get your nipples hard! You impotent nipples bitch!"

Both UPU2 officers remain intentionally unnoticed by the arguing couple as they reach the back deck.

The white-haired UPU2 officer steps into the house, via the open back door, and he growls out, "What the fuck is wrong with you people?"

DREAM looks directly into the lens of Boxer's camera, and says, "Check this out, pig! Fascist dogma applied. Revolution by surprise! My pussy will not be denied a vote in your subjective election. That's an original poem... by DREAM."

The dumb bitch is wearing a disguise, but still couldn't accept that she wasn't getting full credit for her "genius" so she name-dropped herself.

We have an over-the-shoulder view of the white-haired UPU2 officer, courtesy of Boxer, and in reaction to this original poem, the officer instantly draws his UPU9, and without hesitation, shoots DREAM in the chest. She falls onto a plastic-covered sofa, then on a full second delay, the squib attached to her chest goes off.

The UPU2 growls, "Dream over," then pivots to a very panicked Dion.

As Dion stares into the lens of Boxer's camera, the look on his face is genuinely heartbreaking. It's a wordless acknowledgment that to tempt fate is to invite its wrath.

The UPU2 pops a single round in Dion's chest, and Dion falls backward so that the untouched wedding cake is all that remains standing in the foreground.

The squib under Dion's sky blue vest goes off, again too late.

"Flow my tears," the UPU2 says.

"They weren't armed," Boxer gasps out, then the UPU2 grabs the camera from him, and the director of photography suddenly becomes the subject.

Boxer is predictably wide-eyed and steeple-fingered.

"This is my deal now," the UPU2 growls, "Get the fuck out of here... Santaros."

Boxer and Ronald look at each other- Boxer is shocked because this is the man he has to become, and Ronald is shocked because, in the war, this might have been the man his brother was.

Boxer sprints out of the house, away from the scene, tearing at his bullet proof vest like it's filled with spiders.

"These are the fireworks we set off on the third of July," the UPU2 growls, to no one in particular.

Ronald turns to the camera, and the UPU2 officer tells him, "Find yourself."

“What?” Ronald asks, trying to mentally unpack everything that just transpired.

“None of your business,” the UPU2 hisses, then says, “Now, get the fuck out of here.”

As Ronald runs from the scene, we ask Pilot, “What the fuck did we just watch?”

*“You just watched an inspired idea, executed by idiots- a double-murder committed by a racist UPU2, captured on tape by a movie star with political ties. But what DREAM and Dion never anticipated was the untimely arrival of Officer Bart Bookman.”*

Zora's UPU2 boyfriend must be Officer Bart Bookman- the man who committed a real double-murder.

We watch the feed as Bart sets down the camera next to the cake, then steps back, in frame, and snaps on a pair of gloves. He uses a cloth to wipe down his UPU9, then picks up the camera again, and begins inspecting each of his kills. He notices that DREAM has squibs on her, and he growls, “What the fuck?”

The camera jostles as Bart removes a knife from a sheath on his belt, and places it in DREAM's hand. He then crosses the room and makes his way to Dion. The camera jostles again as he puts his UPU9 in Dion's hand.

This is how backward the results of Marxist practices are- the goal was to create footage of the assassination of an interracial couple and they wanted to do so with their own poor acting ability on center stage, with Bing's lousy squib-job to back it up, but instead of getting their desired result, they actually masked the genuine assassination of an interracial couple by a racist UPU2. This is Marxism at work; counter-intuition at its most realized.

The feed becomes worthless as the camera is casually carried at waist-level out to the cruiser by Bookman, then he sets the camera down on the floor of the front passenger seat. In a small triangle of visibility in the top left corner of the frame, we watch Bart as he pulls the cruiser out into traffic, his eyes remaining hidden by sunglasses, his hands steady.

Instead of the feed flipping over to Zora and Bing as they make their no-doubt frenzied escape from video village, it remains on Bart as he drives.

During a full fifteen minutes of footage- which consists of a repetitive squeak that the cruiser makes when the shocks are compressed- we ask

Pilot to let us buy him lunch, three different times. Each time, he points back to the screen.

Nothing happens, nothing happens, nothing happens, then the cruiser abruptly comes to a stop. Instead of popping open his door, Bart takes out a flip phone, and makes a call. "It's done," is the first thing he says, never identifying himself, and we can't really hear what the person on the other end of the call is saying- we can only hear the deep crackle of their voice. Bookman has a feed outside of the jurisdiction of our powerful director.

"Looks like they were trying to fake some sort of racial incident- I believe another group is trying to scare the catalyst into action," Bart says, and suddenly we're lost.

"Did Zora know Bart was going to crash the reception?" we ask Pilot.

Pilot shrugs.

We watch Bart as he listens to the deep voice on the line, then finally says, "Well, it was a hell of a lot easier than shooting a rocket at a moving SUV."

"Wait. Did Bookman flame boil The Whopper?" we ask Pilot, as a crucial piece of the puzzle lands in our lap, almost as an afterthought.

Pilot only smirks at this.

"Who's he talking to on the phone? And don't pull that bullshit 'You'll have to wait and see' line."

*"Maybe a shadow overlord? As far as I know, we never find out."*

"It doesn't sound like anyone we've seen so far."

*"No, it does not."*

"Why don't we have a tap on the line?" we continue with the questions.

*"Why indeed."*

"Pilot, be serious. Who sent Bookman there, and was it to spring Boxer or Ronald into action? Which one is the catalyst?"

*"Wait to see who he calls next."*

"I'll contact her," Bookman says, then ends the call. He immediately enters another number into the phone, and when we hear Zora's cheery greeting of, "Hey there, papa bear," it's still not over an audio feed of the line, it's just residual noise from the cell phone speaker.

"How'd I look?" Bart growls. There's a pause, and he doesn't smile at whatever Zora says.

"If you filmed me from the shoulders up, that shit better not get out beyond the Frost campaign," Bart threatens, "Remember, you told me that we're going to get paid a lot of money to destroy it, not release it."

After a short pause, Bart tells Zora to, "Take out the trash, then we'll meet up at my place. They swept the compound today. Don't go back there." There's another pause, then Bart growls, "You get to choose what we do tonight- do you want to fuck... or watch a movie?"

The feed switches to the end of the Utopia 3 tour, which seems to be taking place in a mega-mansion, and we hope that we'll never find out if Bart watched a movie, or if he fucked Zora.

The feed is in crystal clear HD, and it appears that there's another press conference happening.

On stage, from left-to-right, stands Bobby, Madeline, and Vaughn. There's been an outfit change from earlier in the day, and now Bobby is wearing a blue shirt with a bolo tie, and he's concentrating deeply on a cheese plate in his hand. To his left is Madeline, and her blond hair is intermixed with wavy extensions that rest dully on the sparkly tank top she's wearing. A man we presume to be Vaughn is in a pinstripe suit, and he's wearing Bobby's video-enabled sunglasses, likely transmitting this meeting to Nana Mae. Looking at this group, it's almost as though they dressed for their personality.

The POV settles on a podium, and we can't help but laugh as Baron walks into frame, dressed in an outfit that's a mix between Michael Jackson and the polar-inverse of the Pope.

Taking his place, center stage, Baron, in his grating voice, declares, "The tides have turned. No longer must we burn the spirits of the dead! No longer must we treat our precious ozone layer like the bastard stepchild of the cosmos! No longer can even the most jaded Neo-Con fat-cat deny the majesty of our mother ocean!" Veins in his neck bulging, Baron looks to the ceiling, and we can't see what he's looking at, because it's out of frame, but if we had to guess, his focus isn't on heaven, but instead on Serpentine.

That's how we've come to view Serpentine- on high, pulling the puppet strings, making Baron dance on a stage.

Since Bobby has a crew of reporters in tow for the day, they start treating Baron's speech like the beginning of a press conference.

A man in a black suit, whose back is to the camera, asks, "Mr. von Westphalen, what do you have to say about the allegations that a corruption in the tidal drag has caused a rift in the space-time continuum?"

"To that, I say... prove it," Baron responds.

"Scientists say it's happening," the man in the black suit adds.

"I'm a scientist and I say it's not happening, so... there's that," Baron counters, and we see Bobby chuckle at this.

"When will we get a look inside those warehouses you own in the desert? There are rumors that you've abused monkeys!" a fat woman holding what appears to be a Palm Pilot says.

"We are making the United States a better, safer, greener place to live and work in. This is being accomplished by the work done in Treer Tower 1 and the R&D facilities that we had built by American workers, which now employ American workers, and has the end goal of benefiting American citizens."

"All of your employees are sworn to secrecy," the fat woman points out.

"If you want a look at our top-secret project, come on down to watch the flight of the Jenny von Westphalen mega-zeppelin tomorrow, for the Fourth of July! We're inviting everyone to the launch!" Baron announces.

"How will you fit them all on the zeppelin?" is asked by the fat lady, who obviously has issues with fitting in any space smaller than a boardroom.

"Oh, they absolutely aren't invited to go up in it, nor are you, I just meant they can hang out on the streets nearby!" Baron says, amused by the confusion.

"Are you sure that's safe given the current climate in the city?" a baritone-voiced man asks.

"You mean how they're predicting rain in LA? That is weird," Baron says.

"No, I was referring to the increasingly agitated public. People are staying out at night, and the lights never go off in this city anymore," the baritone-voiced man says.

"Why wouldn't they? You need to get with the younger generation, who are embracing this system we've blessed them with. What Treer has created will allow this city will burn brightly for a thousand years."

"That sounds like a punishment," a lady points out.

"It's not a punishment, it's a promise," Baron says, in a snarl.

"You're promising something that sounds sinister," some lady points out.

"Maybe you're interpreting it as sinister because it's such a leap, it will make you rethink everything you've known prior?" Baron fires back.

Pilot startles us, as he begins reading from his Bible:

*"Revelation 22:5 There will be no more night in the city, and they will have no need for the light of a lamp or of the sun. For the Lord God will shine on them, and they will reign forever and ever."*

We keep our eyes on the screen, and we see Vaughn turn away from the crowd, and take a phone call while Baron is speaking. We're surprised that, instead of the audio feed of Baron's in-house presser, we have audio of the phone call.

Vaughn speaks quietly, but we hear him crystal clear on the tapped line, his greeting a relaxed drawl of, "Frost Campaign, Vaughn Smallhouse speaking. How may I help you?"

"This is Jericho Cane," we hear Boxer's booming voice on the line.

"What?"

"This is Jericho Cane."

"Boxer," Vaughn says, nearly in shock, putting a hand on Bobby's shoulder. "Boxer, where are you?" Vaughn hisses, and both Frosts turn away from the audience.

"I'm in Venice. Somewhere in Venice," we hear Boxer say.

"Boxer, listen to me. Go to The Baja Cantina- it's a restaurant at the mouth of the Venice Canal and Washington Blvd."

"The Baja Cantina," we hear Boxer repeat, then the connection drops.

Vaughn confirms to Madeline and Bobby, "We found him. Venice Beach," and Madeline hugs Vaughn, thanking him for doing something her mother couldn't accomplish.

The feed flips to a camera used to monitor an intersection, and there stands Boxer- his bulletproof vest no longer on his body- and directly behind him is a massive Eliot/Frost campaign ad, that says, "WE'VE ANSWERED OUR CALL, AND WE'LL LISTEN TO YOURS. CALL 1-800-FRO-ST08 TO LEARN HOW YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD."



"Nana Mae set up an entire system to find Boxer, and failed, but Bobby's campaign poster worked," we say to Pilot.

*"I was on a poster like that once. They removed my head from a picture I took in front of a pure white background, and they inserted it onto the body of some guy in fatigues who was standing with the NOW girls."*

"Why didn't they just get you to pose for the shoot?" we ask.

*"Sometimes I wonder the same thing."*

"What was it like to walk by that billboard and see a version of yourself that looked exactly like you, but wasn't like you?"

*"I felt like a Taverner."*

On cue, the feed switches to the dashcam of the Taverner UPU2 cruiser. The cruiser appears to be safely parked inside some type of parking garage.

Ronald is in the driver's seat, looking down at his open palms, while Zora is in the front passenger seat, and Bing is in the back.

"What happened today, hun?" Zora asks, turning to Ronald, "Why'd ya call for backup, when you aren't a real UPU2?"

"I didn't call him, and you didn't intervene to stop that psychopath. I'm not taking the heat for that. Dion and Dream are dead and there's blood on your hands."

"You're the one with a red palm," Zora points out, and Ronald quickly makes a fist to block out a bizarre glow he's emanating.

"Don't look at my hands, look at yours. My hands were tied," Ronald responds.

"Actually, your brother's hands were tied, and there's only red food coloring and liquid cornstarch on our hands. DREAM and Dion were rigged with squibs, remember?"

"A bullet came out of that UPU2's gun and entered DREAM, then the same thing happened to Dion. It was real. I saw it."

"We doubled up on the squibs, Ronald, two each," Bing says, leaning forward.

"I thought my name was Roland?" Ronald asks, and we realize that possibly in the way Boxer is slowly becoming Jericho, Ronald has had a break and now views himself as Roland.

"That's what I said, I said Roland," Bing responds, clearly just going with whatever will keep him out of trouble. He's now wearing the

expression of a guy terrified of the possibility that his art project turned into a murder scene.

“What's wrong with you, hun?” Zora asks Ronald, sounding concerned.

“I think you've been lying to me, Zora,” Ronald says. He exhales, slowly putting things together- becoming a true UPU2 detective- and he states, with confidence, “Yeah, I think you've been lying to me all along.”

“Okay, now you're just being paranoid,” Zora says, but in the dashcam, we see that Bing has joined Ronald in his skepticism, and he stares at Zora with disdain.

“While I was fleeing the scene, do you know what I heard on the radio?” Ronald asks, then lets her know, “I came upon a news report that said that two Venice Beach residents were found shot dead earlier today in what appeared to be a domestic dispute that ended in tragedy. Do you know who the people were identified as? Veronica Mung, a celebrated performance artist who used the stage name DREAM, and her husband Dion 'Element' Gibson. And do you know what details they provided? They said authorities believe that Dion shot DREAM, then turned the gun on himself.”

“See. It will be fine. Everyone will think that DREAM and Dion returned from the set of some picture, irritated and tired. You know how these movie sets can be. Lots of tension. People will easily believe that Dream and Dion came home and the argument began before they even had time to take off their costumes. We can suggest that they didn't get enough cardio-” Zora responds, her neck tight with stress.

“-*that* was not the plan,” Ronald interrupts, “They were wearing disguises. There was supposed to be a racist UPU2 on the footage. They weren't supposed to be identified. I listened very carefully, and I did the math on the time. This information broke as they were still bleeding out on the floor of that soundstage of a house. There was barely any delay between that madman UPU2 showing up, and the report airing.”

The squib-specialist looks paranoid, and says, “Listen, guys. I think I'm going to rollerblade on home now because I don't really want to be involved in this anymore, like, at all.”

“Okay, Bing,” Zora says, trying to keep it together, “Go ahead. Good luck. I'll be home before sunrise.”

“Sunrise?” Bing questions.

“I have to run a few errands,” Zora tells him.

"You can keep the rollerblades, Zora. Just consider them a gift," Bing says, fumbling with the door handle.

"You take care, Bing," Zora says, staying put in the car as Bing gets out of the cruiser, then begins to rollerblade away.

Zora and Ronald don't say anything to each other. They sit in the cruiser in silence, and just when we think the feed is going to flip to the next scene of chaos, Zora reaches over and jabs a Treer syringe into Ronald's neck.

Ronald tries to pull out the needle, but quickly falls under the control of the Liquid Karma. In damage-control mode, Zora pops the driver's side door of the cruiser open, then pushes Ronald out onto the garage floor.

The feed begins to jump from intersection-to-intersection on traffic cams, as we now watch Bing rollerblade down Market Street. With the waves around us crashing louder than ever, flexing with power, it's almost peaceful to watch stupid ass Bing glide along, until a UPU2 cruiser- red and blue lights, siren and headlights all off- bursts through the intersection and strikes Bing head-on with such force that his body hits the windshield, spider cracking it, and the speed of the cruiser is so fast that Bing clears the rest of the car, and lands on the street, at which point he begins rapidly twitching. Instead of blasting past the carnage, the cruiser screeches to a halt, then reverses, driving over Bing again, dragging his body on the hot asphalt, leaving a stain. The cruiser backs out of frame, taking Bing along with it, so only a single rollerblade is left as evidence of the third murder Zora has orchestrated today.

The waves crash, the night rises, the heat festers, and the rift opens wider.

The feed switches to Cyndi's hideout, and most of the frame is filled up with the fat lady- not the one from the press conference, but the one whose name we didn't catch- the lady who might be Cyndi's girlfriend, but we don't want to imagine it. We're viewing this lady from the webcam on the Deepthroat Two laptop, and she's taking a bong rip, obviously distraught about the raid that happened earlier.

The feed flicks over to a camera in the corner of the room, and the change reveals Krysta lying on the sofa, and Cyndi in an armchair alongside her.

"He was supposed to be back from the ride-along hours ago," Krysta tells Cyndi, as though she's her therapist.

Cyndi sends a look to the fat lady with the bong, and it's in this moment that we realize Krysta has no idea that Cyndi Pinziki is part of the Neo-Marxist revolution. Krysta is here because she's worried she won't be able to deliver what she promised for her talk show.

Walking a careful line, Cyndi says, "Maybe after the ride-along, Boxer stopped off at his manager's to tell him about this role."

Eyes on the ceiling, Krysta says, "But Roland never came back either. It's not like Boxer to just disconnect... except for when he..."

"Except for when he..." Cyndi leads her on.

"This is my fault," Krysta sulks.

"What is?" Cyndi asks, then we notice that she glances at the fat woman, and we realize the director was telling us something. A silent signal was being sent when the footage started out with the webcam, then moved to the camera that showed the room. Cyndi's fat friend is almost certainly recording everything Krysta says on the Deepthroat Two laptop.

"It's my fault for pulling him into all of this. Muriel told me that I ruined her life, and I became blind to what I was doing," Krysta says, trying to state this as quietly as possible.

"Who's Muriel, and what are you doing?" Cyndi asks, pumping Krysta for information.

"She's in my screenplay, *The Power*, and I always knew it was important, but at the time I wrote it, I didn't know Jericho Cane would be Boxer Santaros. I heard Jericho's voice in my head, but when I thought about his face... there was nothing there. It was just..." Krysta glides her hand in front of her perfect nose. "Then one day, I'm doing my usual strip poetry, and Fortunio walks in with Boxer, and I realize- *that's him*- that's Jericho Cane. Boxer Santaros sought me out so we could save the world, and to make sure this was the truth, his memory was wiped. By whom, I have no idea, but this allowed me to tell a little lie and I 'reminded' him that we wrote the screenplay together. While it wasn't true in the literal sense, Boxer *was* essential to what was on that page, so I decided that I needed him as invested in this massive undertaking as I was. You know, to save the world, and to pay for the extensive CGI that we're going to need."

"I don't understand how a flaky actor disappearing is your fault," Cyndi says, sounding like Nana Mae Frost, which means she's probably hoping for more information.

"Because I kept telling him that he's Jericho Cane, and I was always running lines with him, and I ignored some warning signs, when he started to have these... breaks... where, uh, he'd like... twiddle his fingers, like Monty Burns... and his eyes would get real wide. Now that I look back on it, I understand that this was him on the bridge to becoming Jericho Cane."

"So he's method?" the fat lady asks.

"He's too method," Krysta responds, "He's like... method-man."

"The rapper?" Cyndi asks.

"No, just a man who commits to his roles to an embarrassing degree," Krysta specifies.

"Boxer Santaros is Daniel Day-Lewis? That's the declaration you're making?" the fat lady asks.

"Yes, but edgier! Boxer is... Daniel *night*-Lewis," Krysta responds.

Cyndi winces when she hears this.

"And what I'm afraid of is that when he was on that ride-along, he became Jericho Cane incarnate and he's begun to save the world without the help of Dr. Muriel Fox," Krysta continues.

"And... you are Dr. Muriel Fox?" the fat Neo-Marxist lesbian asks, high as fuck.

"So you have a third name now?" Cyndi asks, trying to manage a brand that is spreading like herpes.

"Only when we're talking astrophysics," Krysta clarifies.

"This could be a segment, 'From Astroglide to astrophysics,'" Cyndi paints the air with her hand, then assures Krysta, "I'll make a call."

"Do it now," Krysta says.

"Do what?"

"Call Boxer's people. What if he... damn it. What if he doesn't love me anymore and went back to his wife?" Krysta asks, and when both of her eyes close, two black streams of tears slide down her cheeks.

Cyndi seems to have genuine emotions for a second, and picks up her binder, then searches for a number. Her finger hammers down on one of the sheets of paper, then she grabs the laptop, and the webcam shifts so it's just a really unflattering angle of her face. She makes a call, and it almost rings out, until we hear a voice that lisps even without using a word with the letter "s" in it, "CWA, how may I direct your call?"

"Hello, yes, I need to speak with Boxer Santaros' representative. It's an urgent problem regarding his safety."

"I'm sorry, he's unavailable at the moment, I could transfer you to a general mailbox if you'd like."

"What do you mean he's unavailable? Unavailable, my ass!" Cyndi responds, then there's a very long stretch of silence as she furrows her brow. The screen must be telling Cyndi that the call has ended, because she yells, "Those fuckers hung up! How the fuck am I supposed to protect their dumb ox of a client if they won't even let me speak to his people?"

"These Hollywood managers, they think their shit don't smell." the fat lady says.

"Let me tell you something, Teri. When the shit hits the fan, it all smells the same," Cyndi responds.

"Fuck, yeah, it does," the fat Neo-Marxist, apparently named Teri, responds.

"Shits actually have their own smell-personality. If you do enough ass-to-mouth threesomes, you really start to notice the nuance," Krysta corrects the women, but they don't listen to her, and instead choose to continue to bitch about how hard it is to coordinate underground transactions in 2008 when no one at the big three agencies will even take a call.

Looking to the ceiling, Krysta says, "I need you today, if you'll be gone tomorrow." We hope she's talking to Boxer, or Jericho, and not God Himself.

The feed clicks back over to the Frost event, and we remain in the POV of Bobby's glasses- given away by the fact that the bottom right corner of the frame is blocked by a champagne flute. The view we're getting is of the edge of a garden party reception. The midget from the library sits down across from Serpentine, who wears a stunning floor length gown, and smokes a cigarette while looking off toward a fixed point on a tall column.

Over the din of the party, we hear the midget hiss, unprompted, "The world is merely an object being manipulated by him. Your Baron is drunk with power, the tidal generator is driving everyone mad, and this madness- this religion of chaos- will not abate until the end of all things."

Serpentine, either finally understanding, or repeating these words as a toast, says, "Until the end of all things."

Ready to call it a night, we start to say, "Do you want to-" but Pilot places his hand on the top edge of the screen and the moment he does, the

feed switches to a dashcam that shows us Boxer, in the back of a black FluidTownKar.

"Where are we going?" Boxer asks, barely visible in the back seat of the car. Since he stripped off his vest in a panic, he's only wearing a white wife beater and jeans.

The driver, an overweight black man in a suit, says, "You are about to walk into a very exclusive party at the von Westphalen mansion."

"What should I do when I get there?" Boxer asks, his hands raising.

"Well, I don't mean to meddle in your business, Mr. Santaros, but the news has mentioned your general absence more than a couple times today, and I think ya might be in the doghouse right now."

"This is a FluidTownKar. I'm in a car right now," Boxer corrects him.

The driver laughs good-naturedly at this, then says, "At some point, you're going to have to step out of this car, and into that party."

"What should I do when that time comes?" Boxer asks.

"Well, if I had to guess, I'd say a security guy in a black suit is going to meet you at the door of the mansion. If I was going to give you advice, I'd tell ya to follow him, and he'll most likely lead you to Madeline, in the grand library. Now, she's gonna be mad, so you better turn on that movie star charm."

Boxer nods at this, taking it all in, then he asks, "Will Vaughn be there?"

"Yes, Mr. Smallhouse was who sent me to get you," the driver responds.

"I need to save the world," Boxer says, "I need to answer my call, like he answered my call."

"If ya don't mind me asking... where were ya calling from? They didn't know where ya were for a while now."

"I was... in the street... I called from... Krysta's phone," Boxer says.

"Krysta?" the driver asks.

"Krysta Now. I've been with her at Fortunio's."

"Oh shit. Mr. Santaros, do not tell your wife that," the driver warns, laughing to himself.

"I don't have a wife," Boxer responds.

"I hear that's how Krysta leaves dudes feelin'. Nobody rocks the cock like Krysta Now," the driver says.

Boxer nods at this, deep in thought, and he continues on like this for too long. We stare at his face half-hidden in the shadows, and we understand that he truly misses Krysta.

Eventually, the car comes to a halt, and the driver looks back at Boxer.

"I- I'm sorry... I don't have any money," Boxer says, patting his pockets.

"I'm not looking at ya so I can get a tip. I'm looking at ya to see if ya want a tip," the driver responds.

"Sure. Yes. Please. Sure... sir," Boxer responds.

"Well, when I was younger, and I would get myself in situations like the one you've found yourself in, I'd always come back home with my tail between my legs, and as I was getting grilled about what I was up to, there was one guiding principle I had."

"What was it?" Boxer asks.

"I'd imagine that the world was going to end tomorrow, and I'd adjust my responses to that situation. What if I was just starting my last twenty-four-hours on the Earth. How would I want to spend it? Arguing? No, that's not how. Silent? No, that's not how. Most of the time, I found, in this frame of mind, what I would want to do is hold close the ones I love."

"Hold close the ones I love," Boxer repeats.

"Ya got it. Now let's get you out of this car before one of Bobby's guards pulls you out and shoots me in the neck," the driver says, then he hoists himself out of the car.

Boxer takes a deep breath, then the door pops open, and with no other choice, he steps out of the car.

The feed switches to a security camera outside the von Westphalen mansion, and as Boxer approaches the front staircase, he's accompanied by a suited security guard- possibly Secret Service- who leads him inside.

The feed hops between various cameras, through a party in full swing, as Boxer is brought to a specific room, away from the festivities.

The feed settles inside a book-lined grand library, as the man in the suit announces, "Boxer Santaros has arrived."

Bobby, Madeline, and Vaughn are all in the library, and they turn to Boxer in obvious anticipation.

Instead of looking at the group's reaction, we study Boxer, who's actively confronting this tidal wave of stimuli that has arrived like an explosion rushing forward. It seems memories are unlocking and ballooning for him, as his old life collides with his new life.

Madeline, instead of rushing toward Boxer, asks in almost a taunting way, "What? You've got amnesia or something?"

Boxer points at her, and declares, "You're my wife."



"Damn it, I can't..." Madeline says, bringing her hand to her face, then she huffs a breath of tired disappointment and walks behind Bobby.

Vaughn, a pro at these types of situations, steps forward toward Boxer, and tells him, "I am just so glad you're alive."

Boxer gives Vaughn a loose hug, and he still doesn't seem to understand what's happening.

Once Vaughn steps away, Boxer looks past Bobby, to Madeline, and reasons everything out, "If you're my wife, that makes Krysta... or Muriel..."

"Oh great. How many whores are there?" Bobby asks.

"A lot, but nobody rocks the cock like Krysta now," Boxer says.

Bobby doesn't protest this, but Madeline does, and demands of the man in the suit who brought Boxer, "Find Krysta Now and bring her to me right... now."

"She and Fortunio took care of me when no one else wanted to," Boxer reveals to the group.

Vaughn places a hand on Boxer's shoulder, then says, "We think it was a Neo-Marxist group that abducted you."

"Fucking cockroaches," Bobby scoffs.

Boxer walks over to Bobby, and he says, "I heard your message, and I'm ready to save the world."

Bobby purses his lips, squints his eyes, then asks, "Does that mean you're going to campaign by my side in California?"

"I have so much to learn from you," Boxer says, completely focused on Bobby, "It will be extremely unfortunate if we're killed tomorrow."

"Is that a threat?" Vaughn asks, mobilized, moving between the men.

"No. The threat is out there," Boxer says, pointing toward the window, and in this exact moment, lightning flashes, then thunder cracks, and we look to the sky, feeling the first raindrop.

The feed switches to Teena MacArthur stationed in a portion of what we assume is Utopia 3.

A soldier arrives in frame, turns on a dime, salutes at attention, then says, "Teena MacArthur. Private Huntley, system test admin."

Teena looks the soldier over, then asks, "Station 7 Hermosa beach?"

"Yes 'mam."

"Still grappling with the nightmares after your dose-trials?" Teena asks.

"No, mam. The Fear has subsided, thank you," he says, then pivots, and informs her, "I'll be moving on to viewing USIDent voice triggers."

Teena nods at this, then says, “No disrespect intended, but I’m going to opt out of saluting so much. I find that it’s compromising the integrity of my rotator cuff.”

The soldier continues on his way, then Teena turns and faces a command center. She picks up a walkie-talkie, and radios out in a smooth, pleasurable voice, “General Teena MacArthur, seeking Simon Theory in Planet Telex. Do you copy?”

“Where the fuck is Planet Telex?” we ask Pilot.

*“Inside the Jenny.”*

Before we can process this, we hear Simon radio, “Good afternoon, Teena. What’s today’s forecast?”

“We’re looking at heavy rain. Highly unusual,” Teena responds.

“Well ya, that’s what Utopia 3 is saying, but has anyone thought to check in with God on the subject?” Simon asks, then goes full fat-guy atheist, and starts ranting, “Or maybe Zeus while we’re at it. How ‘bout the Easter Bunny, or any other of the antiquated concepts of the eternal?”

“You view the Easter Bunny... as a concept of the eternal?” Teena catches Simon.

“Some people believe that life is about locating a series of pre-hidden Easter eggs, until you open one and it’s rotten,” Simon just bullshits.

Teena doesn’t regard this comment with even a cursory consideration, and asks, “What’s the game for tonight, dungeon master?”

“What’s the game, what’s the game, what’s the game,” Simon repeats, raising the tension, then he finally says, “Tonight, Teena, we are going to play a little game I like to call Serpentine Dream Theory...”

“Alright, let’s go. Game on,” Teena responds, staring at the screens of the command center.

We hear Simon’s knuckles crack, then he says, “Teena my queen-a, earlier today, I was watching some footage from a dashcam of a UPU2 cruiser that was reported off its beat.”

“You’re setting up a beat-off joke,” Teena predicts.

“Surprisingly... no. Not this time,” Simon admits.

Still trying to cut him off at the pass, Teena says, “You performed a search for all UPU2 vehicles off-beat, then trolled their dashcams hoping that one of the UPU2 officers was nailing a girl at the beach.”

"No, I didn't stumble upon any of that. Was that what I was initially looking for? Who's to say, but what I *did* find was Boxer Santaros, and officer Roland Taverner, together, discussing a dream Roland had-"

"-and in the dream, Roland was driving his cruiser, but the steering wheel disappeared, and the only way to steer the car was by Boxer's dick," Teena sighs out another prediction.

"One- that idea is fucking gnarly, two- the dream was about the maze," Simon reveals, and this changes Teena's body language. She quickly asks, "The maze where I-"

"-the maze where you had Lester the ranger executed," Simon completes her sentence.

Teena is now fully playing the game, and she asks, "What happens in the dream?"

"They meet- Santaros and Taverner find each other in the center of the maze."

"What happens when they meet?" Teena asks, hanging on every word.

"Roland Taverner, in full UPU2 uniform, comes upon Boxer Santaros in a green hoodie. They're walking through this maze, and they can't find the end, so they come to the conclusion that one of them has to kill the other to get them out."

Teena smiles at this revelation, and asks, "Why would they come to that conclusion?"

"Because dream-Boxer claims that he sealed a rift before by taking an arrow to the dome-piece."

"So Roland needs to kill Boxer?" Teena asks.

"No. Roland is wearing a UPU2 uniform, while Boxer is in civilian clothes, so Boxer tells Roland that it needs to be the UPU2 that bites the bullet to eject them from the rift."

"Karmic debt," Teena sighs, understanding.

"Precisely, my dear."

"So if we get both Boxer and Roland back to the maze... you think we can close this rift by killing Roland Taverner?" Teena asks.

"Two keys placed in a dual lock that, when turned, together, instead of opening a door, close it for good," Simon muses, "Sure as shit seems like a better theory then, 'Maybe the rift will just close itself if we stop mentally picking at it?'"

"Simon, I can't explain away what you've put together here, so I'm on board," Teena admits, as a show of desperate confidence.

"And so it begins," we hear Simon say, then with this simple declaration, the feed switches to a view of Simon's command center in Planet Telex. We watch as he takes an item out of an egg-shaped case, then places it on the security lock of a briefcase that sits in front of him on a table.

"What's that key he's using?" we ask.

*"That would be a severed thumb."*

We snarl in disgust at this.

Simon opens the briefcase, and a glow enlightens him.

We hear Teena's voice say, "Simon, I'm going to have to deal with this at another time, Baron calls," then the feed switches back to her.

"Oh, what the Pulp Fiction ass shit was that?" we ask, as the feed shows Teena picking up a bulky red telephone handset, then cooing, "General Teena MacArthur."

"This is the wizard, Baron von Westphalen. Remove the paladin body from Utopia 3 and move it to the Planet Telex."

"Who will look over the body once it's delivered?" Teena asks.

"Simon Theory will be handling The Whopper. This relocation is being made at his behest," Baron reveals.

"10-4, sir. I will remain in Utopia 3 tracking your flight path. Over and out," Teena responds, then the call ends without another word from Baron.

"Why does he want a corpse in his zeppelin?"

*"To scatter the ash."*

We don't take this literally, and ask, "But still. Is that legal?"

Instead of answering the question, Pilot quotes scripture.

*"He hath cast me into the mire, and I am become like dust and ashes."*

"Baron flame-broiled the whopper?"

*"I never said that. Baron merely cast him into the mire."*

"What's mire again?"

*"Mud."*

On the screen, in a brand new setting, we see security camera footage of Zora loitering outside of a tattoo parlor, the cruiser parked at the curb.

"She kidnapped a UPU2 officer, coordinated and filmed a double murder, then performed a hit-and-run in a stolen cruiser, and now she's just dicking around?"

*"You're forgetting one thing."*

"What?"

*"She's a Neo-Marxist."*

"Oh, true. They don't believe in repercussions for their actions."

*"You know who does believe in repercussions?"*

"...us?"

*"Ronald Taverner."*

It's almost as though Pilot was introducing Ronald because that's exactly who steps into frame a split-second after his name is said.

Ronald puts his UPU9 to Zora's head, and we can't hear what he says, but we can fill in the blanks.

The question becomes, *Did Ronald replace the blanks with live rounds?*

At this range, the answer really doesn't matter.

Zora hands Ronald what we presume to be the keys to the cruiser, then she points to the curb where it's parked.

Ronald lowers his weapon, then races to the squad car.

The moment he gets inside, the feed switches to the dashcam, and despite a day's worth of practice, we see that Ronald's driving hasn't gotten better. He pulls away from the curb, and the road moves fast behind him. To clear a path, he flicks on the siren, then guns the engine. A conversation is going on inside Ronald, and only pieces of it manifest outside of his body. His brow furrowed, his face contorted into a grimace, his image swings from crying to brutal anger, with sniffs and grunts, twitches and taut muscles, tears and bubbling spit.

The image of Ronald Taverner pushed to the edge is too much to endure and we don't realize that it's causing us to hold our breath until the feed switches to the security camera outside of a stone building, and we exhale. We can't tell what building it's attached to, but the feed is wired for sound, and we hear a choir starting and stopping, performing pieces of songs until something trips them up. The siren that whooped over Ronald's psychological breakdown slowly returns to the feed, and when the UPU2 cruiser finally appears in frame, a promise made earlier in the day is kept.

Ronald, still posing as Roland, has arrived to meet his mother.

We fully believe that the woman who called Ronald on Roland's cell phone is Roland's mother. This begs the question, *Why, when Ronald asked if he should bring "Ronald" in the cruiser, did his mother not know who that was?*

The security camera is at such an angle that we can see Ronald in the front seat of the cruiser, and his normally muted expressions have been replaced by pained eyes and a snarled lip as he speaks with himself, not in hushed-whispers like Boxer, but instead in teeth-gritted expletives. The scene in that house on Nowita Place seems to play in Ronald's mind over and over, like he had a copy of the footage. Ronald punches the steering wheel of the cruiser, as he curses himself for being so stupid and knowing nothing of the world, then he catches his reflection in the side mirror, and he punches it away, spidering the mirror, damning his luck.

The feed switches to the cruiser's dashcam as Ronald immediately pulls his fist close to his chest and it begins to drip blood. A man unafraid to deal with repercussions, he reaches over and grabs a tissue to cover the wound.

As he's wiping up the blood, his adrenaline spent, the sound of the choir soars inside the church, and the change on Ronald's face- from focusing on the pain, to focusing on a collective of voices- is so profound that we feel our expression change as well. It appears as though Ronald is trying to pick his mother's voice out of the stunning collection of climbing notes. He stops focusing on how he's hurt, and he opens his palms, extending them out, the bloody tissue dropping onto his lap. We notice that Ronald's right palm begins to glow red, as the choir's power reaches its peak.

Ronald looks down at the severe light, transfixed by the fact it seems the blood has been replaced with a glow.

The feed again returns to the security camera to show us that, as the voices soar, so does Ronald's cruiser. Inexplicably, the car has begun to levitate in the air, as the light bursts from Ronald's right palm.

When the choir suddenly stops singing, the cruiser drops back to the street, its shocks squawking.

Inside the cruiser, we watch as the light in Ronald's palm goes out.

Out of breath despite not moving at all, Ronald holds his hands up, and it looks like his wound has fully healed.

Ronald smiles at this, then he laughs, then he cackles. He only stops laughing once people begin to exit the church. Older women and bearded men file out into the dusk, while Ronald waits to be recognized as Roland.

Then, it happens. A petite woman who's probably in her early-fifties makes her way to the cruiser, and we hear her say, "Hi Roland! Look at you in your car!"

Ronald gets out of the cruiser, then makes his way to Ms. Taverner. He hugs her tight, like he's afraid she may levitate away. After the hug, we get a clear look at the woman, and the hunch we had is confirmed- this is not the woman that claimed to be Ronald and Roland's mother on that yacht. The woman on the yacht was someone playing a part. At least that lady was smart enough to not ask Bing to do her makeup.

Ronald walks around to the passenger side of his cruiser and opens the door. His mom gets inside, then Ronald shuts the door with care.

This man who's run the gamut of emotions today now wears a smile. Ronald then begins to make his way around the cruiser, but stops just before his door, and bends down to inspect the front shocks, as though he's searching for a reason why the car rose off the ground. He doesn't find anything out of place, or a lifting mechanism, so he returns to the driver's seat.

The feed switches to the dashcam, and after buckling his seat belt, Ronald eases the cruiser into the flow of traffic, and he tells his mother, sincerely, "You sounded incredible."

"Oh, we did not. That practice was *rough*," Ronald's mother says. She's pretty for an older woman- her white-blonde hair hides her gray and her nose has just enough of a slope that we presume she took advantage of LA's sprawling plastic surgery offerings.

"*You* sounded fantastic," Ronald reaffirms, then he glances over at her to make it clear this is a compliment directly intended for her.

"It's so nice of you to pick me up from choir practice," Ronald's mother says, unable to fully accept her son's admiration.

"I should've done this sooner," Ronald says, for multiple reasons.

"It's alright. I know you're busy and things are harder than ever for the UPU now."

Ronald takes this in, nodding, then says, "You're right. Sometimes, I feel... like I'm a pawn. Like things are moving around me, instead of me being in control of them." This is a degree of intimacy that Ronald has been unable to establish with anyone else.

"I understand," Ronald's mother says, "You've only had jobs where you regularly encounter bad people- angry people- people with agendas. Those

are the people you find yourself speaking to on a daily basis, and because of that, it's hard to see the good in people, but it's there." Ronald's mother looks out the window of the cruiser to see one man pull a gun on another man- both unaffected by the fact a UPU2 cruiser is driving by. She sighs, "It's there," and this repetition is a tired protest.

"I'll be alright... *we'll* be alright, Mom," Ronald says, and again his smile appears. He never once called the woman on the yacht "Mom" and his intuition has been rewarded.

Suddenly realizing that he has no destination, Ronald says, "I'm not used to this route, could you make sure I take the right way home?" and his mother immediately begins to provide not only directions, but also general critiques of Ronald's driving.

"Mam, I'm going to have to ask you to refrain from judging my driving, or you'll be spending the rest of the trip in the cage behind me," Ronald says, putting on a Jericho Cane-like UPU2 voice.

Ronald's mother smiles at this, and says, "You can just never be too careful when it comes to these new Fluid Karma vehicles. People have reported strange behavior with these cars, and as much as I appreciate the fact we have a fuel source that doesn't require more members of our family to go to the Middle East, I can't help but feel a little paranoid."

We feel good as we watch the Taverners safely navigate through a newly-chaotic world.

Wherever they were before, it wasn't raining, but now Ronald throws on his wipers, and the calming drumming of raindrops on the hood and roof of the car reminds us of how wet we're getting on the turret. We don't want to leave merely because of the rain. This is a genuinely good moment, and we appreciate that we're able to witness it. The pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, and the worst day of Ronald Taverner's new life now seems to also be the best.

Outside of the cruiser, things look crazier than ever; Inside the cruiser, a new peace breaks out.

Ronald drives out of the city, and into a development not unlike the one featured in the ad where those two Treer vehicles porked each other.

"Here we are. You can park in the driveway; I'm not expecting anyone," Ronald's mother says, and we can't see the house, even after the cruiser is put in park, but we *can* see Ronald admire a home he can't remember inhabiting.



The feed switches from the dash-cam to a satellite feed that's massively zoomed out, obstructed by rain clouds, and non-detailed. We watch two moving dots that we presume to be the Taverners entering the house.

In the same crushing reality we experienced in Tawna's home, we have a clear view of Ms. Taverner's living room. There must be a TV in this room.

Ronald immediately gravitates toward the edge of the frame, while his mother disappears into a different room.

"Man, these take me back," Ronald says, and we aren't sure what he's looking at, but we have a hard time believing the statement.

"I've meant to switch them out. Time hasn't been kind to some of those pictures," Ronald's mother yells from somewhere else in the house.

We can't see any of the pictures, we can only see Ronald's reaction, and a series of complex smiles slide across his face during his review of this wall that travels through time.

"Your father looks just like you in this one..." Ronald's mother says, appearing in frame, then she adds, "...well, with a bit more hair."

"He does, doesn't he?" Ronald marvels. As he moves to his left, he says, "You have a picture of me with Pilot Abilene?"

We don't look to Pilot to gauge his reaction, because we've learned that people don't exist in this life merely for us to ogle. It's bizarre that this was a lesson we were taught on a trip to LA.

"Of course I do," Ronald's mother responds.

Ronald's stare is unbroken after spotting this picture.

Putting her hand on Ronald's shoulder, his mom says, "I'm proud of you- that you've handled everything in a way that... well, you know.

"What were you going to say?" Ronald asks, softly yet desperately.

Ronald's mother doesn't look at him, her hand leaves his shoulder, and she says, "When you got drafted, I was less scared of what would happen when you left us, and I was more scared of what would happen when you came back... Watching your father struggle... and succumb to the... you know. I saw the imprint it left on you. I saw the way it affected you. I was terrified you would end up exactly the same way. When everything happened- when you got your discharge- I was so afraid, and I've been so afraid since. I think I kept this picture on the wall because as long as you were fighting that war, there, you wouldn't be home, fighting a different war, here. So when I called you today, it was to make sure that you're

surviving the war you're fighting here because I was scared. And when you asked to see me, then you pulled up in your nice shiny cruiser, and you were wearing your sharp uniform, it made me feel so relieved... and so proud. I know it's not easy for you to do that job, and I know it's not easy for you to reach out in the way you have today, so... I just want to thank you for being so incredibly brave."

Ronald turns to his mother and embraces her like a child would, at the exact moment that Pilot stands up from the turret and walks away. He walks to the edge of the yellow roof, and we have to get up and follow him because Pilot is a soldier too, and he was injured by his best friend, Private Roland Taverner.

"That was amazing," we say, standing at the edge of the Mariasol with Pilot, as the Tidal Generator glows. The bright color cutting through the night, along with the light rain makes us think of *Blade Runner* for a moment.

*"Yeah. Totally wild. He levitated a car."*

"Who cares about the car?"

Pilot half-turns to us, and it takes him two tries before he's able to get out a sentence.

*"Ronald's dad shot himself ten years after returning from Desert Storm. Ten. Years."*

"Then Ronald's mother watched her only son get drafted."

*"Then she watched him come back."*

"Then she stood in her house with him, and they held each other."

*"And another man that looks exactly like Ronald is somewhere out on the street, confused and alone."*

After Pilot makes that statement, he walks back to the turret, because the man he went to war with is now living out of a dumpster... if he survived the fall at all.

We stay at the edge of the roof, and look back toward Pilot, not letting him distract us.

*"Come on. Krysta is arriving at the Treer mansion. This is important."*

We can't argue this milestone event's importance so we walk back to our seat and sit down.

On the laptop screen, the same black FluidTownKar that carried Boxer arrives at the mouth of the opulent Treer mansion.

Krysta steps out of the car, as lightning cracks above us, and behind her. We jolt at this, and the pathetic display on our part makes Pilot smile. It eases the tension that had built up after watching Ronald with his mother.

Krysta looks phenomenal. She's wearing a khaki colored Burberry trench coat, and her blonde wig doesn't look too shiny like it sometimes has the tendency to do when she's been shooting *NOW* by the saltwater all day.

Krysta's stripper heels make her walk like she's a wobbly baby deer as she carefully makes her way up the wet stairs, taking them almost sideways.

The moment she walks into the Treer party, the feed clicks over to show us women scoffing and men leering.

Following the man in the black suit, Krysta becomes the focus of every room she's in until she arrives in the grand library, and she sees Boxer. She gasps when this happens, and it's a time-frozen moment that's shattered by the announcement, "Krysta Now has arrived... now."

"Oh, I *can't wait* to meet her," Madeline says, picking up a DVD off of the table, then approaching her unwanted- yet necessary- guest.

Bobby nods enthusiastically, not picking up on the sarcasm. He seems genuinely pleased Krysta Now has shown up.

Madeline circles Krysta like a shark, until she's standing directly in front of her, then she shows her the DVD, and asks, "Cock-chuggers 2?"

Krysta smiles at the cover of the DVD, and instead of expressing shame, she asks, "Do you want me to sign it?"

"Who the fuck makes this shit? Huh?" Madeline asks, shaking the DVD in front of Krysta.

"That one was done by GagSpit.xxx," Krysta responds.

"She made those a long time ago," Boxer says.

"Yeah, GagSpit.xxx is shut down now," Krysta confirms.

"They're up to Cock-chuggers 17," Vaughn mentions, but then realizes this information is not helpful, so he takes a full step backward from the conversation.

"The rights reverted back to PissQueens.xxx that shot the second trilogy," Krysta tells Vaughn, "The whole situation was very messy- the legal battle... as well as the cock-chugging."

"There's so much more to her than that DVD. Krysta just cut her own pop album," Boxer says, moving things along, then sings, "*Teen Horniness is not a crime.*"

"*Keep an open heart and an open mind,*" Bobby muses wistfully.

Krysta makes a heart with her hands and directs it to Bobby.

Boxer continues listing Krysta's resume, "She's developing her own reality show, clothing line, jewelry, perfume, and not to mention an energy drink- which I've tried, and her drink tastes really, really, good." This review of everything Boxer has recently discovered makes it so he falls so far back into who he was in Fortunio's house, and he asks, "Can I see the DVD?"

"No!" Madeline snaps, "Can you not see that she's completely set you up? I mean, is there... is there, like, video footage of the two of you together?"

Despite being able to take a pounding with a smile, Krysta doesn't back down, and she admits, "Yeah. There is. Lots of it."

"Okay, okay, so... so we have to give the bitch whatever she wants," Madeline says, trying to square up the situation.

"She wants a million dollars and a yes vote on Proposition 69, assuming she's Deepthroat Two," Vaughn says.

Krysta shakes her head no at what she perceives as a mis-accreditation, and says, "I'm not in that one."

Madeline rushes to Bobby's side, and says, "Daddy, Daddy, we have to give her whatever she wants to get that footage back! We can't have that shit floating around!"

"This is extortion, sweetie-kins. A million dollars is a lot of money, and we don't negotiate with terrorists," Bobby declares.

"Cock-chuggers 2!" is Madeline's entire response.

"If this gets out, the election is over. It's an election year, Bobby. Everyone pays," Vaughn adds in a way that he seems to hope sounds sensible, "She's right, we should pay."

"Take it out of *his* bank account," Madeline says, pointing at Boxer, then she exhales, "Thank God I didn't sign a prenup."

As this circus swirls around the library, Boxer hasn't been looking at Madeline- he's been looking at Krysta, and this enrages his wife, "And you know what? Maybe now is the time to let you know that I am *pregnant* with *your child*."

"Pregnant? You're pregnant?" Boxer asks, finally looking at Madeline.

"Yes! You were gone when I needed you the most. I've made all the decisions about this by myself," Madeline says, holding it together pretty well for a pregnant woman.

"What are you going to name it?" Krysta and Boxer both ask.

"Andrea," Madeline says, and the relief on both of their faces that she didn't choose "Caleb" creates an inside joke that they begin giggling about.

"What the fuck are you two laughing about?" Madeline yells.

"Get Krysta out of here," Bobby says, bewildered by all of this, "We won't negotiate with her."

"You're missing one important point, Senator Frost," Krysta says, standing her ground.

"Oh, yeah? And what's that?" Bobby scoffs.

"I never once asked you for money. You, and your daughter, and your adviser caved to demands I never made. I hope you realize that not everyone is as guilty as your wife would have you believe," Krysta says, then Vaughn and the man in the suit each put a hand on one of Krysta's shoulders and lead her out of the room.

Unable to control her emotions, Krysta turns, and says, "I love you, Jericho Cane."

"I love you, Muriel Fox," Boxer responds.

"That's Dr. Muriel Fox," Krysta corrects him.

"Astrophysicist," Boxer says, finally accepting her version of the screenplay.

"Get the fuck out!" Madeline screams.

The feed stays on the Frosts in the library, and none of them seem okay about this reunion. Madeline is trying to process meeting Boxer's mistress face-to-face, while Bobby is trying to process the fact that he's going to be a grandfather. Plus, he didn't get his copy of "Teen Horniness Is Not A Crime" signed.

Once Boxer understands that, as Jericho Cane, he can extricate himself from this tense situation, he slips out of the library, then we watch on the security cameras as he sprints through the party, to the front door.

At the mouth of the mansion, Boxer searches the long curved driveway for his true love. Not finding Krysta's yellow convertible or the FluidTownKar, he turns back toward the party, and locks eyes with the creepy midget. It's a moment one stinger away from being a jump-scare. She's waiting at the bottom of the grand staircase, and she's holding a Fluid

Karma Replicator that blinks yellow, like strikes of lightning. The midget hisses, "We saw the shadows of the morning light... shadows of the evening sun... till shadows and light were one."

Boxer raises his hands, as though he's going to tap his fingers and ponder this, but the midget demands, "Go... before it is too late!" which is a good call, and everyone's first instinct when someone starts reciting slam poetry.

Another crack of lightning punctuates this moment, and Boxer whips around to find himself facing a familiar 1950's looking convertible as it screams to a stop in front of the mansion.

Boxer descends the stairs, then approaches the vehicle, and like a strike of lightning, an image flashes in our mind- Cloris Leachman approaching Ralph Meeker's car.

Boxer takes the keys out of the valet's open hand, then gets into the car.

The feed switches to a dashcam inside the convertible, and we ask, "How does a sixty-year-old car have a dashcam in it?"

"Because that's a brand new FluidKar. It's the TREER50JG.

We watch as the Boxer steps on the gas, fleeing the mansion in this impractical vehicle. He swerves down the single lane driveway so long that it's a road. We deeply hope he's headed to the Hermosa Beach house.

The feed cuts to Nana Mae, in front of a line of screens in the USIDent headquarters. This is a feed that should never be available outside of USIDent, yet we have it available to us. On Nana Mae's desk is a Coleman cooler, and we don't believe for a second that it contains her dinner.

Nana Mae presses the side of the Bluetooth jawbone in her ear, and answers a call with, "UPU5 speaking."

"Well, we found Boxer," we hear Bobby say.

"No, no, no," Nana Mae repeats, turning to the screens on the wall. She frantically scans them so she can pretend she found him first.

We can't see Bobby, but by his voice alone, we know that Krysta Now's words were a reality check to the groin for him. Bobby was taught, firsthand, that he had become cold and nihilistic regarding the people of California, so he says to his wife, "That system you've built. All those eyes in the sky... what's it for, if not for this, Nana Mae? A member of our family is in peril."

We're struck by this human moment from a politician. We have to wonder if this was also spurred on by the fact that Bobby's going to become

a grandfather. His daughter is bringing a child into a very broken world, so Dad is going to grab some glue and go to work as quickly as he can.

With an uncharacteristic desperation, Nana Mae says, "We need to expand funding. If I had the funding, then I could've had more devoted people searching the cameras. I mean, Bobby, I still have Starla on twenty-four-hour shifts for toilet duty at LAX right now. She seems to be powered by the free break room Cheetos alone. This is going to burn workers out, but I'm left with no choice because we're severely underfunded."

With an exhausted sigh, Bobby reminds her, "The system in no way-

"-we were able to get those fucking fingers, don't tell me that what I've built has no purpose. I eliminated a fucking mole in that raid. I'm protecting you- I'm protecting California- I'm protecting the country! Not to mention, I'm saving you in this fucking shitlib state," Nana Mae hisses into the jawbone. She turns away from the screens, then picks up the cooler by its sides, almost like she needs to confirm it's real.

"Alright. You have a second chance. I believe you, so now it's just a matter of showing everyone else," Bobby says, and Nana Mae knows that it shouldn't be this easy, so she asks, "What do you mean?"

"Boxer just stole a car and fled again. He's in a TREER50JG convertible. Find him."

"That could take all night," Nana Mae warns, setting the timeline so far out that she can't fail.

"It could, and it might, so tell your staff what must be done- delegate this responsibility- and come home, damn it. Your daughter needs you, Nana Mae!"

This reality is dismissed in a flash, as Nana Mae remarks, "She has you; she'll be fine."

"Fuck it. Fine. You keep watching your nanny-cam, while I'm here with our daughter," Bobby says, then the call ends.

Nana Mae turns toward the wall of screens, and on the exact center screen, she sees Bobby and Madeline, as they hold each other in the empty library. Nana Mae arrives at a crossroads. She can take the first road and pull up every dashcam of every TREER50JG, but this search would not be for her daughter's sake- it would be to legitimize the ballooning budget of USIDent. The other option, is that she can go home and be with her family. Every screen in front of her displays abject chaos, except for that center

screen which shows her love, it shows her hope, it shows her the road less taken.

Nana Mae sits down in her supervillain chair, and presses on her jawbone, then says, “Hey, babe. I need a favor. Take a screenshot of every TREER50JG dashcam, then send them my way.”

“I can smell you from down the hall,” is the response we hear on the line.

Whoever she's speaking to isn't her husband, and she probably won't speak with her husband for the rest of the night.

As we curse Nana Mae for not being brave, we momentarily look inward, toward our own cowardice, then... we look up, and rain strikes our face.

The space-time rift above us spirals wider.

The feed switches back to the camera in the grand library, and we know that Nana Mae isn't cutting this together, because she just stormed away from her desk, and in the final shot we glimpsed of her, she appeared to be walking through the USIDent facility, past employees who were wearing clear raincoats over tank tops.

When we try to figure out who's assembling this footage, we can't help but remember Bart Bookman's call to that “shadow overlord” with the deep voice that was made after the assassination of DREAM and Dion. We don't want this to be who's behind our curated experience on this turret. From the information we've put together, this shadow overlord had Bart incinerate the SUV at Lake Mead, and he was the man that had Bart arrive to compromise the Neo-Marxist plan to sway the election.

Returning to the mansion, the feed focuses on Madeline, in the crook of her father's arm, begs, “Daddy, just pay the money to make it go away. Please?”

Bobby nods at this, showing he's not adverse to this solution, but he does mention, “They could have other copies, and it-”

“-I don't care,” Madeline says, sitting up, and we expect her to go on a spoiled princess speech, but instead we get the careful statement, “I don't want to be the woman that, for as long as I live, is looked at as someone who had to be escaped from. I don't want to be thought of as the woman who was so annoying, so cold, so prude, that she drove her exceptionally popular husband into the arms of another woman. I have a personality that, on its best day, is grating. I don't want people to see that reflected in



every person around me. Basically, I don't want to be Hillary Rodham Clinton..."

"...because she probably won't even win this second primary, and she'll suffer yet another humiliation, going down in the record books as a perennial loser," Bobby responds, understanding Madeline completely.

"I'm not as pathetic as Hillary Clinton. I'm really not. This is out of my control. And, sure, whatever happened to Boxer between that Easter egg hunt on the beach and the moment he walked back into our lives- sure- it's not normal, but what *is* normal around here lately?"

"Eliot will stabilize things," Bobby promises.

"In the meantime, I think we can adapt. Being an actor, Boxer is a person that, if you hit a hard reset on his life, he will calibrate to his new reality. I think that's what happened with Krysta, and I think if we can all just get past that little vacation he went on... and all the evidence of the vacation is destroyed... then Boxer and I can do this, as parents, and finally grow up. I think this baby is my chance for a reset too."

"Okay, honey. You're right. It's done," Bobby says, and this is the rare promise from a politician that we actually believe. "Let's get you back to the hotel, and tomorrow morning your mother will have Boxer's exact location for us, then we can all celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> on that big dumb blimp, together," Bobby says, painting a future we don't believe in. He receives a smile from his daughter, and this punctuates a difficult night.

As they walk out of the party, shoulder-to-shoulder, people try to approach Bobby, but he ignores them. Right now, the politician is gone, and only the father remains.

Vaughn is waiting for Bobby in front of the grand staircase at the entrance of the house, and as Madeline walks out to an idling FluidTownKar, Bobby tells Vaughn, "Tonight, you route a million dollars from my personal account- not the campaign funds, not your account, not my joint account with Nana Mae- to Deepthroat Two over the USIDeath network- not the USIDent network. Once you do this, I need you to meet whoever they want to send as a rep tomorrow. You must get every last piece of video footage or recent pictures relating to my son."

"Consider it done," Vaughn assures him.

The feed switches back to Boxer's dashcam and we watch his surroundings, waiting for Nana Mae to deliver on her promise. We tense up, fearing the moment a UPU2 cruiser or a UPU3 SWAT van careens into

the convertible, then armed men swarm Boxer like he's a common criminal.

We wait, and we watch, but this moment simply never happens.

Pilot hasn't brought it up, but the rain around us has reached the point where it's showing no signs of slowing, and a decision needs to be made regarding calling it a night. We turn to Pilot, and ask, "What do you do when it rains out here?"

*"I don't know."*

"How do you not know?"

*"It just doesn't really rain here."*

Pilot looks up at the sky for a very long time. We notice that his scar gets more severe as the rain pours down his face, and this makes us realize that, before each day, Pilot applies makeup to his wounds to lessen their severity.

"Let's pop out the screen, then bring it down to the Mariasol, and do a late working dinner," we suggest.

Pilot continues to look to the sky, then he seems to decide that it's worth it to find shelter. He reaches forward, and removes the laptop, and if there ever was a moment to take a break, this is it.

We hop off the roof, then make our way into the Mariasol. Instantly, a cute brunette waitress is by Pilot's side, and she says, "Don't worry. I'll only need two minutes," then, instead of leaving us, she faces Pilot. She takes a towel off her shoulder, and stands eye-to-injured-eye with Pilot, and she wipes off his face until he's dry and the blotchy streams of makeup are gone. She reaches into her back pocket and removes a powder compact, then begins evening out Pilot's skin.

The puff of powder tickling him, Pilot smiles at the waitress, and the waitress, happy to help, smiles back at Pilot.

The Tidal Generator is pumping out ominous fog, the California sky is raining ominous rain, the streets are buzzing with ominous menace, and yet, here we are, safe inside the Mariasol, taking care of each other.

"Perfect," the waitress says, snapping the compact shut.

Pilot continues looking at her, his smile still somewhat present.

*"I needed that, thank you."*

She nods, looks to the dining room, then asks, "Ya hungry?"

Pilot nods.

“Stay right here,” the waitress says, raising her pointer finger at Pilot, then we watch her walk to a table in the left corner of the dining room, and she speaks with the couple who have already been seated there. The couple nods at what she's telling them, then looks to Pilot. The guy at the table- in his mid-40's with a crew cut- doesn't break eye contact with us. We're afraid of what he's going to do- if this waitress is making him give up his seat and this is the last straw in his rift-inspired instability- but then the man stands up... and he salutes Pilot.

Pilot returns the gesture, then the couple picks up their plates and they relocate to an open table in the middle of the seating area.

The combined power of a kind gesture from the cute waitress, then from the veteran at the table acknowledging Pilot, has struck us like a gut punch. These two small moments remind us that tomorrow is the 4<sup>th</sup>, and Pilot has done something incredibly brave to keep us all safe.

Things don't feel hopeless. Not everything is fractured. The Frosts are still a family, trying to figure it all out. Pilot is still a star, even though he's also our friend; he's still a soldier, even though he's a star. This waitress comes to work every day, even though tomorrow might be her last.

We're led to the table in the corner, and its location will keep people from approaching Pilot. This privacy is a deep luxury.

Pilot situates the laptop so we'll both be able to watch it, and we look to the waitress, then order some Bud Lights.

In the time we've been distracted, it seems that the feed has merely shown Boxer continuing to drive, so we ask Pilot, “Don't you think he should have stayed in the mansion?”

*“I think that Boxer had been staying put for too long. I think he's been frozen in inaction as the two identities- Jericho Cain and Boxer Santaros- push and pull against each other, and this is the first time that he actually made a decision. He's chosen to be Jericho Cane.”*

“Madeline Frost-Santaros thinks he's going to become Boxer Santaros again,” we can't help but point out.

*“When he walked back into his old life, and was confronted by his new life, it was Krysta's arrival that brought him joy, instead of the knowledge that he was going to build a family with Madeline.”*

“Yeah, but don't you think that's sort of Stockholm syndrome?” we ask.

*"No. I don't think that."*

We're interrupted as Pilot's cell rings, and he takes it off his belt, then looks at the screen.

*"Fuck."*

"What?" we ask.

*"It's Simon."*

"As in Simon Theory?"

Pilot doesn't respond, he merely answers the call.

*"Hello, sir."*

There's a pause as Pilot is actively listening.

*"Yes, I know where the arcade is."*

Another pause.

*"Yes, sir. I'll be there in under five minutes. Thank you, sir."*

Pilot picks up the laptop, then begins making a beeline across the Mariasol. When we don't immediately follow, he looks over his shoulder.

*"Come on. Hurry up."*

We drop a \$20 on the table, despite the fact that we didn't even order anything beyond the Bud Lights that never arrived.

"Pilot, wait. Where are we going?" we ask, running out of the open door of the Mariasol.

Pushing against the wind, we close the door, and as we navigate the wet stairs with the same wobbly care Krysta exhibited when she arrived at the mansion, we continue to call out to our fleeing friend.

The ocean is raising up, eating the beach, so we're relatively alone tonight.

Pilot is walking with a type of military precision that he had never previously adopted around us, and this seems to indicate that Simon gave him orders which he cannot disobey.

When we catch up to Pilot, he turns to us.

*"Here's the deal, Simon Theory has recruited a new soldier, and it's our job to train him."*

"What does that mean?" we ask.

*"Remember when Simon was doing his word jumble with Teena?"*

Pilot has to raise his voice so he can be heard over the waves, and hammering rain. It takes us a moment to recall what he's referring to. After

sifting through so much, it comes back to us- the scrambled letters, and we respond, "Yeah, sure. Wait. Did we find Freakman Virtue?"

*"That's Simon's belief."*

"And what are we supposed to do with him?" we ask.

*"Simon has sent him a draft notice which instantly makes him enlisted in the US Army, and because he's in the military, we can administer doses of Liquid Karma to him with no legal repercussions."*

"So we're just going to plunge a syringe into his neck?" we ask, trying to talk over the noise of the rain, while still being discrete.

*"No. We aren't. He's going to do it for us."*

"Of all the people Simon could have chosen to set this up, why you?"

*"That's something I'm going to ask the soldiers stationed at the arcade."*

"We're headed to an arcade?"

*"Martin thinks he's about to sell me drugs, with drugs there."*

"Martin the wigger is FREAKMAN VIRTUE?" we ask.

Pilot doesn't respond.

This is no more or less absurd than everything else we've been going through, so we keep pace with our friend, and we decide that we'll be there for him- whatever that may entail.

Our clothes soaked through, we reach the arcade, its sign burning bright with the four letters- "F I R E."

*His word from Pilot's mouth echoes in the back of our mind- "He hath cast me into the mire, and I am become like dust and ashes."*

Two US Army soldiers with M-16s block the entrance of the arcade, and they let Pilot walk right in, but close formation when we try to follow.

Pilot notices we're not behind him, so he turns back, reaches between the soldiers, then literally pulls us into FIRE.

As we walk through the brightly colored arcade, our youth rushes back to us. Everything is just as we remember from a time before high powered video game consoles were far superior to what we played on with tokens. Our local arcade was called Aladdin's Castle in the Camillus Mall. The ski ball, and basketball games, and stand up arcade machines fill FIRE, just as it filled Aladdin's Castle, and this reminds us that Freakman Virtue is more *Freakboy* Virtue.

Pilot gravitates to the ticket redemption counter, and we understand why he settles here when we scope out the “prizes.” Instead of the normal plush toys and plastic slinkies, this arcade is stocked with bottles of booze.

Pilot sets the laptop down on the glass case which doubles as a desk, then he looks toward the two soldiers who started following us at some point, and he tries to get things set up.

*“He wants me stationed behind the desk?”*

“That’s correct, sir,” one of the soldiers says.

Behind the glass-topped counter, Pilot glances down, toward his feet.

*“The box in the bottom right corner?”*

“That’s correct, sir,” the other soldier says.

Pilot’s eyes light up as he notices what’s down there.

*“Does he really want me to shoot Liquid Karma?”*

“That’s correct, sir.”

*“Did he say why?”*

“He said that Martin Kefauver needs to be persuaded to try it.”

*“And seeing me do it will persuade him?”*

“They first tried to get the rapper from the ‘Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime’ video, sir,” the soldier on the left discloses.

*“My star is lower than the ‘Teen Horniness’ rapper?”*

“Only in this particular scenario, sir.”

*“And why’s this scenario unique?”*

“Because Martin Kefauver is a huge wigger, sir,” the soldier on the right says.

Pilot nods at this in agreement.

*“Good point.”*

We remember Martin, from when he pushed Fortunio, and we remember his alter ego, Vikter Faurmane, from *The Power*.

With his mission set in stone, Pilot seems ready for anything. He disappears behind the case for a moment, then when he stands back up, he’s holding a small, black, open-top box. He places it on the glass case in front of him, while the soldiers go back to their post.

“Do you want to call Simon and let him know you’re here?” we ask.

*“He knows I’m here.”*

We feel stupid. Of course he knows, we’ve been watching everything that’s been going on throughout the Southland for days now.

This is the omnipotence of digital voyeurism, and it’s addicting.

We pick the laptop up off the glass case, then open it. There's nothing on the screen, and the laptop can't run out of battery because it runs off Fluid Karma, so we know that we're now supposed to watch Pilot meet Martin, then we're supposed to watch him, up close, as he does Liquid Karma.

The two soldiers who followed us through the arcade reappear, leading a distinctly recognizable, do-rag adorned, Martin Kefauver. The soldier to Martin's right tells him, "Hey, this guy, he ain't no joke, so don't waste his fucking time, you hear me?"

Martin nods.

The soldier on Martin's left announces, "Martin Kefauver has arrived."

*"Welcome to FIRE."*

Martin steps forward, and from the side of his mouth, he asks, "Pi, you really think this is the best place to... ya know... ya know?"

Pilot leans on the glass case, and looks up at Martin with a Kubrick stare.

*"Place it in this box. Don't let them see you do it."*

"Uh, dawg. Don't you have... a back alley? This isn't really-

*-"the box. Put, it, in, the, box."*

Pilot's voice is a soothing-yet-demanding whisper.

With no grace, and maximum nerves, Martin places a Ziploc bag into the box in front of Pilot, then he pretends he was scratching his neck, while tightening his do-rag with the gesture.

Instead of pulling the box away, Pilot leans over it, enjoying Martin's discomfort.

*"Is it kind?"*

"It's straight up Cabo Hydroponic. Make you rock out with your cock out, you little boy band bitch," Martin responds. One of the soldiers places the barrel of their M-16 on Martin's shoulder, so Martin changes his answer to, "It's... uh, it's medicinal."

Pilot, getting the response he was looking for, nods, then pulls the box away, and disappears behind the case for a moment. Martin looks at us with a jittery unease. When Pilot stands back up, he's holding a metal case.

Martin looks down at the case, suspicious of it, then he feels the need to declare, "Dawg, for the record, I seen... I seen all your movies. You're... you're great."

*"I know I'm great. Tell me something I don't know."*

This is the first time we've seen Pilot acting without a screen separating us.

Martin takes this challenge literally, and says, "My dad is your plastic surgeon," then there's an optimistic twinkle in Martin's eyes, because his father has definitely bailed him out of a lot of uncomfortable situations in the past.

*"You're Larry's kid?"*

A famous smile creeps across Pilot's damaged face.

"Yeah," Martin says, relieved that Pilot remembered this name.

*"Shit, man. How the hell are you?"*

"Good, dawg. Good."

*"Tell your dad I said, 'Hey.'"*

"That's your entire message for him?"

*"I mean, tell him... tell him that I'm... I'm going to give him a call."*

"Oh, yeah? Yeah," Martin says, eyeballing Pilot's running makeup, which makes his father's work seem a little less impressive.

*"Yeah, Fallujah's tattoo job needs fixing. I'm still fucked up."*

"Dawg, I gotta tell ya. Today, in the mail—"

*"—anyway, hey. Let's get down to business. I called you because I heard you have the best pot, but I also heard you make deals."*

"I, uh, what?" Martin responds, thrown off that he was interrupted. He looks around for cameras again.

*"Relax, I'm saying that I heard you accept other forms of payment besides cash, and I also heard that you like to explore new business opportunities."*

"Oh. Yeah, I love business opportunities. Pussy, PlayStation 3, and business opportunities, those are like... my top 3... of things."

*"I got something new."*

"Oh, shit!" Martin responds, then under his breath, asks, "You got any Basitonol?"

*"Basitonol is illegal."*

Martin looks back at the two soldiers and giggles nervously.

*"Now, back to business, since that's one of your three favorite things..."*



Pilot presses his thumb onto the print reader on the top of the metal case. The locks pop and Pilot opens the case. Inside, on red velvet, is a Treer syringe. The glow of the LEDs reflects off Martin's face as he admires the contraband, wide-eyed.

We feel confident enough to presume that when Simon Theory opened his briefcase earlier, at Planet Telex, it was filled with Liquid Karma in syringes. Of course, that's why it was glowing, of course, this was how he was going to get more information on Serpentine Dream Theory.

It's possible that Simon is sending us transmissions to the laptop, which makes us wonder if he's also capable of sending dreams to people. What if he implanted that moment on the plane into Krysta's mind? What if this is all a wild goose chase to keep Pilot from turning his 50 cal on the Tidal Generator, and instead have it remain pointed at the innocents on the beach?

Pilot takes the syringe out of the case, then moves it back and forth in front of Martin.

*"Straight up Liquid Karma. Me and my boys been smuggling this skag out of Utopia 2."*

"Do you got colors, dawg? I've only had a green, but I've been fiendin' to try 'em all to see what happens with each color. I heard each gives a different trip," Martin says.

*"It's simple. Green- you dream. Blue- in an hour you feel new. And you can forget about mellow yellow and agent orange, but, hey... I'm giving you blood red."*

Pilot presses the side of the syringe and the LEDs cycle, until they settle on the color red and the vial in the syringe glows red.

"You're giving me that?" Martin asks.

*"Yeah. Don't you bleed?"*

Martin swallows hard, then mumbles, "Huh?"

*"I asked... do you bleed?"*

Pilot taps the syringe, then Martin gets it.

"Yeah, yeah, dawg. I get bloodier than a bitch on the rag," Martin responds.

*"Then you need to take the blood train."*

Pilot moves the syringe back and forth in front of Martin.

*"You talk to God without even... without even seeing Him. You hear His voice, and you see His disciples. They*

*appear like... ha... angels under a sea of black umbrellas.  
Angels who can see through time."*

"I love angels, dawg. Della Reese got some fat ass titties," Martin says. Pilot sets the syringe back on the red felt bedding, then closes the case.

*"Alright. It's unlocked. There's a time limit on that print though, and twenty-four-hours from now, that skag will be locked in there forever so I'd suggest doing it ASAP."*

Pilot reaches down, and from the box, he removes another syringe. He presses the side of the syringe and the LEDs cycle, until they settle on the color green and the vial of the syringe glows this color as well.

Martin takes possession of the case, and as the soldiers appear by his side, he asks Pilot, "Are you going to do yours now or something?"

*"Absolutely."*

"Can I watch?"

*"Free country."*

Then, with an addict's hunger, Pilot brings the syringe up to his neck and gives himself the injection. We've never seen anyone shoot green Liquid Karma before, so we aren't prepared when Pilot's legs wobble, and we have to practically toss the laptop away so we can rush to catch him. We manage to grasp him by the armpits, but he's heavier than we thought he would be so all we can do is angle his slumping body so that he's propped up against the wall, and sitting on the floor.

His eyes are wide- we've seen this look before- yet we fear the worst. *What if Simon Theory realized Pilot knew too much? What if he decided to eliminate Pilot, leaving us, all alone, to save the world?*

We sit down next to Pilot and hold him, much in the same way we imagine Roland Taverner held Pilot. Our wide-eyed friend stares at nothing, and when we reach over to check his pulse, we hold our breath. A jolt of relief- like a bolt of lightning- hits us when we feel that his pulse is normal- it's steady.

Pilot's lips begin to move, and he seems to be saying something- but we can't make out if we're being told a message.

Even after we hear Martin book it out of FIRE, all we can fixate on is the idea that Simon gave Pilot a lethal dose because he found out that Pilot was going to stop the apocalypse.

After minutes of focusing on the message Pilot is repeating, we finally understand the words his lips are forming- *"I got soul, but I'm not a soldier."*

We stand up and grab the laptop so we can play the song for him, but we find that the feed has resumed, and we're grateful for its distraction, because we can't abandon Pilot in this condition, but we also can't *focus* on him in this condition. What we can do is sit with him; what we *can* do is watch carefully, then provide details to him regarding what he missed, when we join him, tomorrow, on the turret. Sure, he already knows what will happen, but just as he told us on that first day atop the Mariasol, he needs to know our take on what the feed is showing us.

The scenery on the screen is familiar. We see the TREER50JG slide to a stop at the exact same overlook where we saw Pilot first do Liquid Karma. Boxer gets out of the car, and despite the fact that it's raining, he doesn't put his top up. The dashcam footage ends, and in its place is footage of the ocean.

This would be where we'd turn to Pilot, and look for answers, but we don't need to because the camera turns, and looks to Boxer, then we hear a voice say, "I'm filming for my show. I'm getting footage to fill the time that you would've been featured."

Boxer walks up to the camera, but Krysta whips it away from him. We believe this wasn't a plan that Krysta had to get even more footage of her with Boxer so she could demand even more money. Krysta seemed to like Bobby, and the empathy that Bobby expressed in the aftermath of his daughter opening up to him, as well as the direct change he made in his conduct, was exactly what we'd want in a candidate to lead us beyond the most complicated summer in human history.

Instead of feeling ashamed about Bobby Frost, we will try to be like Bobby Frost. We make sure that Pilot can see the screen as well, and we don't leave his side.

Krysta turns the camera on herself and she isn't wearing her blonde wig. Her brown hair is sopping wet, and her makeup runs like Pilot's. It seems that Krysta really *has* transitioned into being Muriel Fox, just as Boxer fights who he was.

"Now you see who I am, in the eyes of the rest of the world," Krysta says into the camera, and at first it confuses us, but then we realize she's talking to Boxer.

Boxer doesn't say anything, so Krysta turns the feed so it's pointed in the direction of the Tidal Generator. In a breathy voice, she says, "Now you know who you are, and you can be mad at me, but I promise you, I would never do anything to hurt you. This was never about me taking advantage of you. Trust me, I know what it's like when people do that. I know how fucked up that feels to be an object to someone, and I'd never do that to someone I love."

"I know that I'm a pawn," we hear Boxer say.

"Not to me."

"You can't deny it—"

"—I am—"

"—because Jericho Cane dies at the end of the script," Boxer talks over her.

"Then Boxer Santaros lives on," Krysta counters.

"No. Boxer's already gone. Jericho is all that's left, and Jericho has to die."

"Boxer Santaros is the actor who plays Jericho Cane, so when all this wraps, he will go home to his Republican family and he'll live happily ever after."

"Okay," we hear Boxer huff out, then he adds, "That will be the fourth, but tonight is still the third."

"Tonight is still the third..." Krysta acknowledges, then she requests, "Come home."

With bass in his voice, Boxer explains, "It's too risky. They picked you up from the house in Hermosa Beach. They'll be waiting there when you return."

"Where do we go tonight?" Krysta asks.

"You're the one who's clairvoyant," Boxer responds, then the camera swings up and we see a waterlogged, but still beautiful Krysta Now. We realize that Boxer has snatched the camera, and he begins to interview the host of *NOW*, requesting, "Ms. Now, tell us how you'll be spending your fourth of July."

"I'll be performing," Krysta says, and a smile flickers across her face, "Baron hired me to dance during the dinner portion of the first flight. And I'd like you to be there." Krysta points at the camera. We can't tell if she's pointing at Boxer, at the audience, or at us.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Boxer says, then for what could be the final time, Krysta moves toward Boxer, and disappears from the frame as she wraps her arms around him, while the rain hammers down on them.

Lightning strikes and the thunder growls and the waves crash and the lovers stand, heart to heart, and they hold each other.

Krysta chooses to release Boxer, so Boxer hands her the camera.

She doesn't point it at him, she turns it on herself, and as Boxer makes his way back to the convertible, Krysta's bottom lip quivers, then when the engine to the TREERJG50 turns on, Krysta yells out, "Goodbye again, Jericho Cane!"

"See you tomorrow, Dr. Muriel Fox," we hear Boxer call out, then he asks, "You're sure you don't want a ride?"

"No. I already had my last ride with you, and I wouldn't trade it for the motherfucking world," Krysta says, then she laughs at her own comment.

We hear Boxer's car pull away from the overlook, and a cloud of tidal fog wafts in front of the lens, so we can no longer see Krysta Now.

As the screen is filled with this rolling fog, we put our head on Pilot's shoulder.

*"I've got soul, but I'm not a soldier."*

For a moment, we feel as though we could fall asleep, but a loud, demand of, "Up on your feet," causes our tired eyes to open wide. We're staring down the muzzle of an M-16, and this convinces us to comply with the order.

The two soldiers who led us inside FIRE now stand before us. The soldier to our right says, "Private Abilene will be safe here. It's time we get you home." We study his expressionless face, and we remain aware of the instability caused by the slowing of the Earth's rotation. This makes us not press our luck. We stand up, and make our way around the counter, then we're escorted out of FIRE.

In the back of our mind, we know that we have to read more of *The Power* tonight, because Krysta confirmed that Jericho dies, and the fact is, after everything we've seen on our vacation here, we don't want anything bad to happen to Jericho Cane or Boxer Santaros.

Since we're offered no escort to the parking lot, and the instability caused by the rift is peaking, we run through the rain to our rental.

After slamming the door shut behind us, and buckling our seat belt, we sit in our FluidKar, and we look to the dashcam, and we're surprised by the fact we're compelled to say, "Goodnight, Pilot. See you tomorrow."

Since these dashcams have no display- since they aren't built for two way communication, we put our FluidKar into drive, and pull out of the near empty lot, then navigate the violent and accident-laden streets until we reach the Motel 6.

The moment we step into our room, we strip off our sopping clothes, towel off our hair, then get into bed, naked.

We open our laptop, and almost on autopilot, instead of opening the script, we google the church where Ronald picked up his mother after choir practice. We want to pray for our friend, Pilot, and for Boxer Santaros, and for Krysta Now, and even for Bobby Frost- a man we loathed when we landed in California, but now genuinely like.

Senator Bobby Frost listens when people speak to him, and since this is a skill that we've recently required, we understand how difficult this can make life sometimes. Bobby is running for Vice President of the United States of America, but he ran to his daughter's side, and pushed everything else to the side when he saw that an injustice was happening, and *that* is what makes him a good leader.

Once we find the website for the church, we check the mass schedule, but the morning services aren't early enough that we can make one and still be on time for our final day on the turret. Maybe we're googling the times of these masses because we're afraid that we'll show up at the turret tomorrow and it will be empty. Maybe we watched Pilot go out like Rick McBride.

To distract ourselves, we open *The Power* and skip ahead, toward the last third. We read:

**EXT. JERICHO'S HOUSE--DRIVEWAY. NIGHT.**

Muriel gets out of her CAR. We follow her on a TRACKING SHOT as she checks the car's grill, and we see that it's BLOOD SPATTERED. To get back home, she had to make sure others would never return home. We see it on her face that she took no pleasure in this destruction... It was survival at its most base.

**EXT. JERICHO'S HOUSE--WALKWAY. NIGHT--NEXT.**

As Muriel makes her way up the walkway to Jericho's HOME, a MAN WITH A BAT appears from behind a bush.

MAN WITH A BAT

A pretty gal like you shouldn't be  
out here on a night like this.

MURIEL

Jericho! Help, Jericho!

The Man With a Bat continues forward, and Muriel begins looking for something to protect herself with. She reaches down to the side of the walkway, then picks up a ROCK and throws it, hitting the Man With a Bat directly in the DICK.

MURIEL

Nobody rocks cocks like Muriel Fox!

Muriel steps over the Man who's holding his cock instead of the bat now.

**INT. JERICHO'S HOUSE--BEDROOM. NIGHT.**

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Jericho has his shirt off, and he's sewing up a large WOUND on his shoulder.

Muriel races to be by his side and to help him with his injury, but when she focuses on the gash, she notices something is different.

MURIEL

Where are your tattoos?

JERICHO

I don't have any tattoos. You know  
that.

Muriel puts her hand up to her mouth, and begins backing up.

Jericho notes this reaction in the MIRROR, and he drops his NEEDLE, his wound half stitched, then he turns to Muriel, and the smile he wears- that used to be so comforting- now looks devilish.

JERICHO

Don't be afraid. This is how it has to end.

MURIEL

You're not him.

JERICHO

Tell me where Caleb is.

MURIEL

I'll never let you find him.

JERICHO

I'm here to save the world, and to do so, I need to kill him.

MURIEL

It's never right to kill a baby, unless you're getting an abortion, in which case women have the right to extinguish a human life and you're disgusting if you think otherwise, you bigot.

Jericho begins approaching Muriel, and she attempts to flee.

JERICHO

No matter where you try to hide, I will see you.



Muriel runs out of the room and slams the door behind her.

**EXT. JERICHO'S HOUSE--DRIVEWAY. NIGHT.**

The neighborhood is in chaos. SIRENS blare. We hear a FIRE crackling. LIGHTNING flashes.

Muriel rushes to her bloody car, then hides behind it.

Jericho, now wearing a shirt, is making his way around the house, with baby Caleb holding his hand, walking next to him.

Muriel sees him, and she knows it's the real Jericho, so she wordlessly calls him over, and they both duck behind the car to confer on the state of the union.

JERICHO

What's happening? Are you okay? We've been looking for you.

MURIEL

You're in the house.

JERICHO

Fuck yeah, I am. Jericho Cane is in the motherfucking house.

MURIEL

No, I mean physically, you're inside our house.

JERICHO

Look at me. I'm right here with you, Muriel. And here's Caleb. Don't worry. He's safe.

MURIEL

I was in our home, with you. A version of you with no tattoos was in there.

JERICHO

That guy sounds like he's a couple tattoos away from being very fucking cool.

MURIEL

He wasn't cool, he's here to bring about the apocalypse. You need to go in there and confront yourself.

JERICHO

No, I don't.

MURIEL

It's essential that you...

Jericho doesn't listen, and with his free hand, he removes a ROUND OBJECT from his belt, then THROWS it. Muriel stands up, and watches the round object hit the roof of the house.

All is silent... for a moment... then an EXPLOSION makes Muriel turn away.

JERICHO

I don't do "co-Cane."

MURIEL

What if he was sent here to give you a message?

JERICHO

Then he should have texted me. I have unlimited texting.

Jericho stands up, then steps out from behind the car. He walks toward the flaming wreckage of the house, when... from the RUBBLE, a MAN ON FIRE bursts free.

The Man On Fire staggers toward Krysta's car, but Jericho doesn't flinch. The Man On Fire reaches the end of the walkway, then falls down in the driveway, melting the tar from the heat of his flame broil.

JERICHO

He was trying to bring hell on Earth.  
From flames he arrived, and from  
flames he departed.

MURIEL

You saved us.

JERICHO

Always.

Muriel stands up tall, and no longer hides. She grabs Caleb's hand, and begins to back up.

MURIEL

Ya know, for a guy so confident in himself, you'd think you'd question why the other Jericho stayed in the house while I was out here.

JERICHO

Why would I question that?

Krysta continues to back up, holding tight to Caleb. An expression of panic appears on Jericho's face.

JERICHO

Where are you goin', babe?

MURIEL

You just killed a man who looks exactly like you, who went from hunting down your girlfriend, to mysteriously giving up.

JERICHO

Are you going somewhere with this?  
I'd love to gab like a bunch of gals,  
but I kind of have to save the world  
in, oh, like, ten minutes.

MURIEL

How sure are you that there aren't  
two Muriels like there are two  
Jerichos?

JERICHO

I- uh- there isn't...

MURIEL

Jericho Cane would never give up  
chasing Muriel Fox.

JERICHO (Understanding)

Nooo!

Jericho rushes toward the rubble. With his free hand,  
he begins sifting through charred DEBRIS.

JERICHO

No! No! No!

Jericho lifts a structural BEAM off the ground to  
reveal Muriel's DEAD BODY.

We put the screenplay down.

This doesn't make sense.

This script was supposed to be about Jericho Cane saving the world.

*No.*

This is Krysta's premonition of the future.

There's a message in this script, and it's that Jericho Cane isn't going to save the world.

He's the false prophet.

That means the real prophet is...

VI-

## WAVE OF MUTILATION - JULY 4<sup>TH</sup> 2008

We read about today, today, on the front page of a copy of *USA Today* we found in the lobby of the Motel 6:

*"For billions of years, the daily cycles of the ocean tides have influenced the patterns of hunting, breeding, and feeding, among the developing life forms of our planet. Now, some are saying that a tidal disruption, due to the Treer Industries' three Tidal Generators, is the reason why instability has risen around the globe.*

*Some claim that the Fluid Karma system adopted exclusively by the United States is causing anomalies due to the fact that this magnificent achievement manages to disobey one of the most basic tenants of everything in motion on this Earth- it doesn't create waste.*

*With the rise of this still very new technology, many mainstays of American politics- wars for oil, mass surveillance, and militarized presence in public spaces- have waxed and waned in importance.*

*Tommy Eliot, the Republican nominee for President, has stated that America's partnership with Treer Industries is like an allied partnership with a country, as it provides the US with protection against our enemies, while allowing us to excel at home with tools thought once impossible.*

*In a meeting of the public and the private, on July 4th, 2008, Treer Industries will be holding their first public reveal of their commercial passenger mega-zeppelin. The city is buzzing, and tonight, a block from The Staples Center, the hangar doors will open on Treer Warehouse 4, giving Southland residents their first up-close glimpse of The Jenny von Westphalen, a 900 feet long mega-zeppelin lifted by turbine engines that are activated by the omnipresent energy field of Fluid Karma. The Jenny von Westphalen features a fully digital, side-scrolling, billboard-sized ad space on its left side, and is rumored to be set to display the new Treer Saltair commercial from Treer Industries, as well as previously recorded*

messages from both Tommy Eliot, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton. Goodyear, when reached for comment about this digital ad wall, didn't officially provide a statement, but our contact within the company, when informed about the magnificent billboard capabilities the Treer megazeppelin has, provided an initial reaction of, "Well...fuck."

Once again, military technology is coming home to roost. The first blimp-like aircraft Treer created was used to move cargo and troops into combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, but this new blimp serves to, as Baron von Westphalen put it, "Really make people say, 'Blimps are great,' instead of, 'There's a blimp in the sky. That certainly feels like a bad omen. I sure am glad I'm not aboard that thing.'"

Treer's Fluid Karma solution is easy to love, but in recent weeks it's been noted by a great number of detractors that not only has Treer synthesized a power source, but they've also synthesized a drug.

Teri Riley, a Venice Beach activist, has repeatedly sent USA Today letters and e-mails stating that she believes when a person injects Liquid Karma into their bloodstream, they become a living receiver, capable of mentally accepting "beamed" images, information, and thoughts. She makes further claims that the United States Army is conducting Liquid Karma experiments on active duty soldiers, in an effort to create teams that can conduct missions while communicating only by telepathy. She claims that they feel this "wireless" technology can transfer information like it transfers energy. Many feel that Ms. Riley's claims are absurd as, generally, a person injected with Liquid Karma will be in a near comatose state for at least an hour.

Despite the new technology that is rising up from the Southland, many will be looking for more traditional ways to celebrate the birth of this great nation.

War widow, Tawna McBride, is set to speak at a mega-church gathering downtown before the Treer launch. She'll be discussing how she coped with losing her husband in the field of battle, and she'll also be providing a message of hope, as she discusses her young son who carries on his father's legacy.

Many will also be staying inside this weekend. With temperatures predicted to reach record heights of 157 degrees, and decreased visibility due to tidal fog, elderly and special-needs residents are encouraged to stay indoors and remain well-hydrated. Both UPU2 and UPU3 units

*throughout the state are currently preparing for violence during the downtown celebrations, while Hustler has reached out to local law enforcement, pledging an assurance that military tanks will be available should the festivities become too violent and UPU officer's lives are put in danger.*

*No matter what, it's going to be hotter than Krysta Now this weekend, so remember your handgun and sunscreen, and have a great 4th of July."*

We close the paper and realize that we've come to genuinely believe that the world is ending, despite the fact that we haven't heard of any issues outside of this country. It seems this is the American perspective- *we* are the world. The fact is, the range of the Tidal Generators is limited to the US borders, Baron made sure of this, so could the rest of the world really be affected?

The fact that Rick McBride's story has been changed, and Tawna has been used as a political pawn isn't surprising. If only the journalist who wrote this piece did even an afternoon of research regarding what he's published, he would be able to link Teri's statements with what truly happened to Rick. This would require actual journalism though so it's not surprising the article proceeded to its predictable conclusion without any significant revelations.

Today, the California that we face is fraught with tension and anger. Multiple fights on the LAX shuttle bus are the first thing we see as the lobby doors open to let an old Chinese man inside to hide from the danger.

Knowing we have to get on the road, we sprint out of the motel, past the fight, to our rental, and we make it safely, but as we pull out of the lot, the violence continues in waves, almost like there's a pulse to the anger- like the Tidal Generator is pushing out unrest- like the slowing of the Earth is causing people to become slower mentally as well.

While sitting at a red light, as one of the few cars that are still stopping at them, we feel what at first we interpret as our bumper being tapped, but since there's no one behind us, it's possible it was a small earthquake.

We don't dwell on this disturbance. We choose to believe it was our stomach objecting to our irregular meal times, and we keep driving.

We put on the radio, and hear, "...Star 98.7 in the morning. The FBI raided a Southland resident this morning for downloading files of digitally manipulated thumbprints used for counterfeit US-IDENT cards. Authorities continue to crack down on thumbprint theft security, recently



seizing more than four-hundred severed thumbs from the basement residence of an Anaheim coroner. Sources said the man was intending to use the thumbs to manufacture phantom identification cards for draft dodgers fleeing to Canada. Now, here's Jaclyn Clark with traffic."

Jaclyn says, "LAX remains officially closed at this time due to a code red terror alert. Northbound traffic on the 405 is heavily congested due to-" then we hit the dial, turning the radio off because tragedies regularly overtake the 405 so at least there's consistency here.

Our driving is defensive, our outlook is cautiously optimistic, our need to not die remains significant.

We're able to get a really good parking space at the pier because anyone with an SUV has decided to drive it off-road, directly onto the beach.

We cut through a crowd that's lingering without menace in the lot, and they're wearing matching white T-shirts with a church group logo on them.

Beyond the crowd, we see that tourists and residents are tailgating from their haphazardly parked cars that the increasingly hostile ocean nips at. We look to the sky and can't tell if it's about to rain again, or if the rift is blocking out the sun.

A lot of people seem to be having a good time on the pier- we pass some frat guys, who are hanging out with the roving gangs of topless girls- while other people seem to be having a bad time, specifically the people using the abandoning bikini tops and T-shirts to sop up their own blood after being assaulted by the frat guys.

Inside the Mariasol, none of the waitresses have shown up to work so the Mexican busboys, not knowing a word of English, are the waiters. We're happy that these men don't know any English because the things being said to them by diners are unkind, to say the least.

On the metal walkway, we topple the trash can, then stand on it to climb onto the roof, and we're bursting with the same need to see Pilot that we originally had when we did this the first time, at the start of our vacation.

Standing atop the trash can, seeing Pilot on that turret, behind that rifle, we feel infinitely safer. He seems no different post-Liquid Karma binge. This Pilot Abilene is the Pilot we've spent every day of our vacation with. This is the guy who changed our life. He notices us and pats the seat next to him.

*"Happy fourth of July!"*

We pull ourselves onto the roof, grunting out, "Happy fourth, Pilot," and it feels weird, but necessary.

In an effort to not study a post-bleed Pilot, we sit down next to him, and immediately turn and face the Tidal Generator. The waves are now smashing the generator at a height we've never seen before- maybe because of the heavy rain yesterday- maybe because the Earth understands it has to destroy the Tidal Generator to save itself.

When we turn back around, spurred on by the electronic buzz, we see that Pilot is reading his Bible, as a feed plays from Zora's new flophouse.

Instead of lowering the Bible to watch the laptop, Pilot lowers his Bible and turns to us.

*"You spent the second-to-last night of your life watching me get high."*

We shrug.

*"I'm sorry you had to do that."*

"It had to be like that," we respond.

*"I told myself that too."*

We both look back to the screen as Zora searches inside DVD cases for something that undoubtedly will be used for blackmail.

Pilot sets his Bible between us, and we pick it up, then mention, "You're still cramming for the test, huh?"

*"I want to be as prepared as possible for when it's go-time for the plan."*

"What's the plan?" we ask, feeling like we missed an e-mail.

*"We wait until the mega-zeppelin is in the air, then we rush downtown to the Staples Center."*

"I mean, I love Kobe as much as-

*"-we're going to stop it."*

"Stop what?"

*"The end of the world."*

"How do you expect us to do that?"

*"By joining hands in a unified front to fight this thing."*

We think about all the footage we've watched, and Pilot's corny answer actually kind of makes sense, so we say, "Okay, that's the plan. We'll fight, together."

Pilot looks out to the beach, and watches men and women fight each other.

*"Imagine if everyone knew this was their last day on Earth."*

"Are they doing this because of the Earth slowing or are they doing this because they suspect that today is their last day on Earth?" we ask.

Pilot looks to the sky, then his hand extends up.

*"How do you ignore that?"*

Under the blanket of a rift, we remain tense, aware that items can not only be pulled into this rift, but they can also exit it.

*"This is how the world ends. Not with a whimper..."*

"...but with a bang," we finish his statement.

*"Just as it started, so shall it end."*

"Not necessarily," we respond, hoping to instill confidence in our friend.

*"When you arrived here, you climbed onto the roof, knowing you'd be looking down the barrel of a gun. So, when you climb down today, or tonight, will you carry that same bravery?"*

We shrug, then look to the screen as Zora places a DVD case on her coffee table.

*"Ask me about it."*

We don't look at Pilot. We focus on the screen, which might as well be black because there's nothing significant happening on it.

*"When I bled that night, on the overlook, did they screen that for you?"*

"Yes," we say quietly.

*"What did you think about that?"*

"It didn't seem out of line with everything else."

*"So you just wrote it off as a staring contest?"*

We shrug again.

*"What about last night?"*

"It had to be done."

*"Thank you for staying there, with me..."*

Since he's giving us the opportunity, we ask the question that we've tried to suppress since leaving F I R E, "What did you see when you did Liquid Karma last night?" we ask, maybe because we plan on doing it to escape the madness tonight. Maybe it's a way out.

*"What happened was the same thing that always happens when I bleed."*

"Always happens... as in?"

*"As in, every night I do it, it's the same. It doesn't diminish like other drugs."*

"Every night?"

*"Every night."*

"Since?"

*"Since I started."*

"You started..."

*"In the war."*

"Like Roland did?" we ask.

*"Yes."*

"After you came back from the war, you continued to do it?"

*"Yes."*

"When you go home at night... do you do it?"

*"Yes."*

"Why do you do it?"

*"Because... I get to exist in a song that helps me... I live in the music."*

We should be watching the screen, but we feel angry that someone like Pilot Abilene could be forced into a war, then shepherded into addiction by the same corrupt system, so we ask, "Did they do this to you?"

*"They?"*

"The US Army."

*"I thought you didn't care."*

"Depends on what we're discussing," we say, then we stare at Pilot, until he nods to acknowledge us.

*"You remember Simon Theory?"*

"Oh, you mean the legless pot smoking oracle? Yeah, that name might ring a bell."

*"Do you want me to tell you a story or do you want to be difficult?"*

"Explain."

*"While I was stationed in Baghdad, Roland and I were called into a small tent near the edge of the base, where the zeppelin was grounded. Inside the tent instead of the pop-up furniture, there was this custom-designed blackjack table, a bunch of laptops, and a game that, to*

*my uninjured and inexperienced eye, looked like Dungeons & Dragons."*

"He's definitely playing D&D on the Utopia 3 feed."

*"Good eye."*

We roll our eyes at Pilot trying to charm us with self-deprecating jokes.

*"So Simon sat down- well, he's always sitting down- but he rolled in front of a blackjack table, and he started dealing the cards. As he was doing this, he looked over at us and asked if we'd heard any rumors about drug experiments on the base."*

"How'd he choose you and Roland?"

*"Didn't say. All he told us was that Baron von Westphalen had signed an extensive contract with the United States Army. This contract offered permission to conduct top-secret drug experiments on soldiers."*

"How could Liquid Karma help a guy who needs all his awareness?"

*"That was the question. So Baron gave Simon the authority to select a small group of soldiers who he deemed fit to be experimented upon. And like you said, yes, there were issues, and there were side-effects for each blend. That meant the blends had to be tested- you know, like flavors being taste-tested."*

"What were the 'flavors' of Liquid Karma they had developed at that point?"

*"Green, blue, yellow, orange, and the classic- red."*

"What were the effects?"

*"Depends on the color channel. One was to hopefully establish neurotransmission between test subjects, one tried for dimensional shifts in time, then there was the 'I See Dead People' one..."*

"Which one did Simon give to you?"

*"All of them."*

The conversation hits the wall, and all we hear are the growing waves crashing into the pier. Finally, we're able to swallow down the lump in our throat, and we request, weakly, "Don't do Liquid Karma today. Please." We can't look at Pilot when we request this, so we look out to the beach, and

our vision normally isn't good enough to pick out a particular person, but this person is so massive that he's hard to miss.

We see Boxer, walking across the beach, carrying a six-pack of Bud still on the rings. The cans are cracked open, and he's lifting the collection of cans to his mouth, then letting the beer pour down into his face and onto his chest.

He has his hood down, and tourists are taking pictures of him, with him, then getting their cameras stolen.

"Pilot, look," we say, our finger divining where he should place his focus.

Pilot huffs a laugh.

*"Happy fourth of July, Boxer."*

We both watch Boxer-as-Jericho for an extended moment, then we ask, "What's he doing? He's just..."

*"...chugging beers and living his best life. Man, I was a TV star, but that dude is a fucking movie star."*

"Who's that lady he seems to be meeting up with?" we ask, then squint to make out what appears to be an ugly woman in a flowered outfit and a ridiculous headband, who's yelling something at an increasingly concerned-looking Boxer.

*"She's probably just begging to suck his dick because the world is ending, while Boxer is just kickin' back Buds until his porno girlfriend performs a striptease on a blimp in front of his wife."*

We smile at this. Pilot is as relaxed as we've seen him on any other day—he's operating with the coolness equivalent of a day-drinking beach-combing star. Then, in a chilling turn, everything fractures. The ugly woman suddenly lifts her arm, and in her hand is a gun, which she points at Boxer.

Pilot instantly becomes a different person and the turret announces that we're rotating so that he's in the perfect position to do his job.

"Who is that though?" we ask, squinting at the woman.

*"It doesn't matter."*

"It does," we maintain, because Pilot is performing a ritual that will end in a death. We begin to whimper, "We can't hear what she's saying. Don't do anything drastic. We don't even know who she is."

*"When a gun is in your hand and you're pointing it at a human being, who you are doesn't matter... what you're saying doesn't matter..."*

"You can't honestly believe that," we respond, repulsed by the smirk on Pilot's face.

*"I know it to be a fact."*

"When a gun is in your hand, it absolutely matters what you're saying. It's the only time people listen."

*"She could be down there giving the winning power ball numbers for tonight, but as long as she's still holding a weapon on a public beach, it still won't change what happens."*

"What's going to happen?" we ask.

*"You already know."*

"Why aren't you doing it then?" we ask, skeptical of our presumption.

*"Good point."*

We can only get out, "Pilot, n-" before Pilot's rifle cracks like lightning, sending a bullet straight through the ugly woman's abdomen. A red mist disperses the crowd, who flees in a frenzy, then they're swallowed by the white mist from the Tidal Generator.

We spring up from the turret, as Pilot radios in to report his shot.

We walk to the edge of the roof, and wait for something to happen- for someone to storm the Mariasol- but when we hear General Teena MacArthur radio, "Great shot, Pilot. One-and-done. You're a star," we realize it's over.

Two soldiers trot out from the tidal fog to the beach, and they neatly conceal the ugly woman's limp body in a desert camo body bag, then in a matter of minutes, it's like nothing ever happened. The beachgoers return to the scene, and Boxer is gone.

Pilot pets his rifle, and we watch him, because we're afraid that he's going to do some Liquid Karma to deal with what he just did.

*"Come here, you don't want to miss this.:"*

We don't move.

*"Come here, and sit down!"*

"Why?"

*"Because this is footage of Treer Industry's meeting with Japan about Fluid Karma so either mourn one life and*

*make me the bad guy, or pay attention to this screen so you can save six billion lives as we help take down the bad guy."*

Still keeping a distance, we explain it away, "Baron can't give them Fluid Karma. It's in the contract."

*"There are lots of stipulations in that contract."*

Pilot's smile after making this statement damn near forces us to walk back to the turret, which we do, but we don't take a seat. We understand that this is how the apocalypse could spread beyond locations that are in range of the Tidal Generators. Baron could attack a high ranking Japanese government official, and instigate a worldwide panic.

The feed shows us a long table that stretches the length of the frame. On the left side of the frame is a well-dressed Japanese man- we assume Hideo Takehashi- and on the right side is Inga, Baron, and the creepy midget.

Serpentine stands next to Mr. Takehashi, spinning a long knife, tip-down, on the table.

"Oh no. Why does Serpentine have a knife at a business meeting?" we ask, taking our seat once-again.

"Da contract, Mistah Takehashi," Serpentine hisses into the businessman's ear.

Takehashi picks up his pen, and without reading the document, he turns to the last page, and signs the contract with a flourish, then extends out his hand, pinning all of his fingers to his palm, except his pinky.

"Um, is this, like, Japanese custom?" we ask.

*"Baron wants to send a message regarding the licensing of Fluid Karma, so he's selected a representative from the Japanese government, Mr. Takehashi, to assist him with this. Takehashi was willing to relinquish one of his fingers in exchange for access to Fluid Karma."*

"Oh no," we say under our breath, then we watch as, in a single fluid motion, Serpentine lifts the knife and slices down with a severe chop, not only removing Mr. Takehashi's finger, but also his *entire* right hand.

"You bastard! You said finger, not entire hand," Takehashi screams in broken English, as he holds his blood-spitting stump.

With a piggish pleasure, Baron snarls, "Clearly your attorneys didn't read the *whole* contract. It stipulates a six-inch margin of error in the cutting radius!"



"Contract said finger only!" Takehashi continues to scream, as though his protest could reattach his hand.

Serpentine sets down the knife so she can pick up the severed hand. To flatten out the fingers, Serpentine presses her palm to the palm of the contractually removed hand, then admires her own work.

"Serpentine, have Mr. Takehashi's hand bronzed and mounted on a cheap, wooden, plaque," Baron spits across the table.

The creepy midget seems unfazed by this whole ordeal and sort of just farts around lackadaisically.

We feel like we're going to puke, and it's only after we hear Boxer, voice agonized, making a call, saying, "A woman was just shot in front of me," that we calm down, because America's greatest action star is having a really tough time this July 4<sup>th</sup>, and that's a recipe for the world being saved.

"Where are you? I'm here for you. I'll meet you anywhere," we hear Krysta's voice on the line. The way it cracks with pain proves that Krysta *does* love Boxer with every fiber of her deeply flawed and completely majestic being.

Boxer called Krysta; Boxer didn't call Madeline.

Maybe he didn't want the ugly woman's death to impact the primary, or maybe Boxer now views Krysta as someone who will drop everything for him, and he really, really needs her today.

We watch on a security camera feed as Boxer seeks shelter from the fans who have followed him post-shooting. Leaning against Walter's ice cream truck, Boxer whispers into his phone, "I know me calling you right now is selfish. I haven't forgotten that you have your TV shoot today. I won't mess that up for you, so could you send Fortunio down here to get me?"

"The only shooting that matters to me is the one you just witnessed," Krysta assures him.

"Just stay with me on the phone, I need to hear your voice," Boxer says, and we hear Krysta let out a little, "Aw," at this because it seems to strike her that the piece that Boxer needs of her isn't the piece that other men seem exclusively interested in.

Talking him down, Krysta asks, "How do you feel after seeing violence like that?" like she's Dr. Muriel Fox.

"I can't explain it. Have you ever watched someone get eliminated off the face of the Earth in a blink?" Boxer asks.

"I have," Krysta says.

"When?" Boxer questions, maybe so he can ask her how she dealt with it, without falling apart.

The line crackles for a moment, then we hear Krysta almost whisper, "I-uh- do you remember... the planes?"

"Sure, when you met Muriel-"

Krysta laughs, then interrupts him, "-damn it, Boxer Santaros. You're the only man that's ever listened to me."

"Tons of men listen to you. 'Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime' is a damn anthem in these streets. Every man from 13 to 19-and-364-days-old owns that song and they listen to you, because, for once, someone is letting them know that they aren't these toxic affronts to society, and the fact that it's a beautiful soul- like Krysta Now- reminding them of this, on-demand, means you have the ear of some very desperate and loyal folks."

Krysta laughs at this, and Boxer finally smiles that movie star smile.

There's an emotional shorthand that these two have developed in their brief time together, and suddenly, a duo who felt like the world was against them have come to the understanding that even if that's the case, there's one person in their life that will always pick up the call... that will always be there for them... that will always make them laugh when things are bad, and make them excited about what the future holds when things are good.

The feed immediately switches to the outdoor cafe in Venice where Cyndi seems to do all her non-finger-related business. We're getting the POV view from Bobby's glasses, but we realize that we're not with Bobby Frost when we hear Vaughn drawl, "Well, Deepthroat Two, I presume." He looks down at Cyndi Pinziki, and in front of her sits a DVD and a thumb drive.

"Did Bobby Frost send you?" Cyndi asks, her image blurring for a moment as Vaughn takes a seat.

"I'm Vaughn Smallhouse. I was present during your failed calls to Bobby," Vaughn says. He reaches across the table and grabs the DVD case, then opens it. "This is the only copy?" he asks, seeming unsure what he's looking for on the disc itself.

"I don't work in distribution," Cyndi responds, "I work in TV development," she adds, and we can't see Vaughn's reaction, but we can guess what it is based on Cyndi quickly becoming serious, and saying, "The footage was originally delivered on this thumb drive, and I was the one who

burnt the DVD. I think those are the only copies. So... wire the money, Mr. Small...whatever," then she puts her finger on the drive and pushes it over to Vaughn.

The POV remains focused on this blackmail contraband, and Cyndi begins to get up, but Vaughn extends a hand into frame, and says, "Please, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Cyndi sits back down, obviously annoyed, then sighs, "Go ahead. What would you like to know?"

"How do you sleep at night?" Vaughn asks, getting into it, not bullshitting at all.

"Very well, thank you kindly..." Cyndi responds smugly, then pushes things further, adding, "...that is, until I hear terrifying screams from next door because UPU3 is raiding my neighbor's house based on false information provided by that Orwellian nightmare your buddy's wife has spearheaded."

Vaughn, not impressed with this outburst, asks, "You ever lose someone close to you- a loved one- in a terrorist attack? 'Cause I have."

"This may come as a shock to you, Mr. Smalldick, but I lost two people in Abilene... two of my four ex-husbands, on a fishing trip, which they took every year to bitch about me."

"I'm sorry that happened to them. That tragedy is certainly the second worst thing that they had to experience on this cruel Earth," Vaughn says, possibly stealing a joke from Zora.

"Guess we're both responsible for ruining their lives," Cyndi muses.

We can't see Vaughn's reaction to this, but before Cyndi gets up, he asks, "What are you going to do with all that free money?"

Cyndi straightens her posture, then says, "Despite the fact that they're willing to let me develop their programs, CTV is unwilling to nurture my content, so I'm going to distribute a documentary film about buildings in America with racist people's names on them, then I'm going to help some women in the Middle East get some more civil liberties."

"That's exactly what we were going to spend the cash on. What a coincidence," Vaughn responds, his statement dripping with sarcasm.

Still fixated on her plan, Cyndi responds, "Do you know what those two words mean? 'Civil liberties?' You ought to write them down."

"Know what? Sure, I'll write them down, and I'll attribute the term to you. It's Cyndi with an 'i', right?"

Cyndi's face goes slack.

"That's right, I know your real name," Vaughn says, taking pleasure in Cyndi's moment of panic.

"How?" Cyndi gulps, looking disoriented.

"Like every other Neo-Marxist, you suck at concealing your identity because you can't shut the fuck up. You arrived here as the mysterious Deepthroat Two, then you immediately told me that you work with CTV, informed me that your two exes were victims of the blasts, and laid out exactly what you'd do with the money we're giving you, so the moment either of those projects premiered, we'd have your name- not that we didn't have it already on account of you being the most loose-lipped deepthroater this shitlib state has ever seen."

Obviously outsmarted, Cyndi responds, "You know, I wasn't going to do this, but I feel very generous today. I'm going to leave you with a little present."

"Wow. I am flattered. What is it, your social security number?" Vaughn responds.

"A taser to the balls," Cyndi responds, then reaches under the table and aggressively zaps Vaughn's dick with the teeth of her stun-gun. The feed shakes to the point of total-blur, then once Vaughn's potatoes are cooked, Cyndi picks up her purse, then says, "You should know that there's another tape out there- a far more incriminating tape featuring your pal- Boxer Santaros, involved in a double-murder. Trust me when I tell you, it's going to cost a lot more than a million bucks to get your hands on that one, because when all is said and done, nobody shocks the cock like Cyndi Pinziki."

The POV angle is now of the red and white checkered tablecloth, but we can still hear Cyndi's parting words- "Eat dick, you nutfucker!"

Vaughn, in retaliation, lets out a strained response of, "Okay, Nana Mae, you have my support in whatever you want to do tonight to these Neo-Marxist animals. I'll convince Bobby it's the only option."

The feed cuts to Zora, walking through her flophouse. After two quick hops to check the peephole, she opens the door, and standing there, at her doorstep, looking wounded and energy-drinkless, is Krysta Now, still clutching her phone from her conversation with Boxer.

"Hi, Krysta," Zora says, and it seems she didn't expect this visit, the way her manic personality is reserved.

“Zora,” Krysta responds, giving her a little nod.

There's a short stalemate, then Zora finally says, “Come on in,” but the moment Krysta drifts toward the sofa next to the coffee table, Zora asks, “So, what do you want?”

“We're filming my reality webcast before the mega-zeppelin party and we can't decide between doing it at the Hermosa Magic Store or The Poop Deck-”

“-and you need Mamma Zora to get the party started!” Zora celebrates.

“Actually, we need someone who knows how to set up wireless mics because our sound guy keeps saying that we're morons for filming at the windy ass beach, and our extensions always get caught or brush up against the mics and cause problems. Can you do sound for us today like you did on that shoot for that DVD '18 Holes' where there were five other girls, and you made sure all of our orgasms were audible?”

“Sure, I can. Sometimes when I'm down near the Tidal Generator, I still think about that scene,” Zora says.

“Okay, cool. This will be good. Should I fire our current sound guy on camera or is that unprofessional?” Krysta asks.

“I think if he was unprofessional enough to question your vision, you should fire him on camera, and I'll make sure his sobs are crystal clear,” Zora says. She's now gainfully employed, and this solidifies that she was never a Neo-Marxist- she's always been an anarchist. “I'm going to go grab my audio equipment, then we can do a quick sound test,” Zora says, disappearing out of frame.

Krysta is left alone, and we watch as she sulks, glancing at a pile of tapes and CDs and DVDs, as well as the monitors from the Nowita video village. It's only when Krysta is standing next to the coffee table that she looks down and sees one of her DVDs- *Clithammer 3000*. She picks it up, admires the cover, then opens the case, but she pauses when she sees the disc inside.

After checking to make sure that there are no cameras recording her, Krysta pops out the disc, slides it into her purse, then closes the case and puts it back on the table. The fact we're watching this from a camera makes us a little afraid for Krysta, but what the hell, it's the end of the world as we know it, so the repercussions for this theft will likely never come to pass.

Zora steps back into frame with a wireless mic in her hand, and she hooks it up to Krysta, then they do a quick sound test, which mainly

consists of Zora yelling, "You bought me this audio equipment, but you never listened to me, Dad!" while they cover the mics with Krysta's wig to test if there's any voice quality degradation.

"Alright, I'm going to go get Sheena and Deena, then I'll drive them in the Nowmobile to The Poop Deck with the cameras. Can you meet us there?" Krysta asks.

"Absolutely, kitten. See ya then. Or should I say, hear you then!" Zora says, rapidly winking, then continues, "Because I'm doing sound, and I refuse to do visuals- it's just not my strong suit. You can see how I decorated this place."

Krysta looks toward what appears to be a blowup doll with a lightsaber in its mouth. She points to it, then says, "Penetrating."

After Krysta's wack joke, the feed hops to Martin's dashcam in his plastic-surgeon-dad's SUV, and we ask Pilot, "Did he do the Liquid Karma yet?"

Pilot doesn't respond, and also doesn't take out his cell to let Simon know "The Primer" is primed.

We look at the top of Martin's black do-rag as he stares down at his lap. He jolts, as a gang of teenagers rush by his SUV, banging their hands on the doors and hood, if for no other reason than to cause discomfort and annoyance.

Martin raises his arms, and in each hand is something that makes us want to tent our fingers in panic. In his right hand is a gun, and in his left hand is the Liquid Karma syringe Pilot gave him. The gun is pointed to his temple, the syringe is pointed at his neck.

"We need to get down there. Martin shooting himself is not enough to close the rift," we say, getting up from the turret. Pilot remains seated, so we remind him, "If he's The Primer, he's about to eliminate himself before he can achieve what he needs to."

Pilot is totally calm- he's acting like nothing's wrong.

*"Maybe the drug dealer needs to leave the Earth before judgment is cast, and he's damned against his wishes?"*

"He has to do it, to close the rift, to pay his karmic debt. C'mon, Pilot. His name is the answer to the word game. Simon confirmed all this shit. Honestly, the Liquid Karma was probably so that he could see the vision of how he starts everything off. We need to get him to bleed, not bleed out."

Pilot remains seated; Martin remains in a Mexican standoff with himself.

We close our eyes for a full ten-count because we're tired of seeing ultraviolence. A bullet ripped through a beachgoer, a man got tasered in the balls, and a high-ranking representative from the Japanese government had his fucking hand chopped off, all in the past half-hour.

When we open our eyes, when we look back to the screen, we see a UPU2 approaching the vehicle with his UPU9 drawn. Martin can't see him because his eyes are closed.

As the UPU2 gets closer, we see that it's Ronald Taverner.

Or is it Roland Taverner?

Where the fuck did we see Roland Taverner last?

Is he dead from a head-injury, laid to rest in a dumpster?

Despite not being a real UPU2, Ronald was able to spend some time with a woman who viewed him as a hero, as a protector, and without a past to draw from, he seems to have really taken to this image he's been issued.

Ronald Taverner is a hero. In a world where everyone is destabilizing, Ronald is solidifying.

With a drive to serve and protect, Ronald arrives at the driver's side window, and in a calm voice, he says, "Please lower your weapon."

Martin's eyes open wide, and he trains the gun on Ronald. It seems to immediately register for Martin that he's about to become a cop killer, and instead of doing something regrettable, he drops both his gun and his syringe onto his lap.

Ronald holds out his free hand and demands, "Give me the gun, or I'll shoot you..." and when he realizes his error, he clarifies, "...I'll put a round in you, somewhere inconvenient, but not fatal, then I'll drive you to the hospital because I want to save your life."

Martin begins to reach for the gun, but Ronald gets uneasy with the situation he's just put himself in, and says, "Actually, leave that in your lap. Let's have a conversation first. If you're still unhappy at the end of it all, then you can do what you were going to do, but give me five minutes. Let me sit next to you for just five minutes."

Martin whimpers, sighs, then says, "Get in."

Never taking his eyes off Martin, Ronald gets into the passenger seat, then shuts the door.

For a moment, both men look out the windshield, but we can't see what they're looking at.

"I'm going to grab the gun now," Ronald says, looking to Martin, "I won't touch your dick. I promise."

"Okay... you can grab my gun... no homo," Martin responds.

Ronald reaches over and picks up Martin's gun. The moment the gun is in Ronald's hand, his palm begins to glow red, and Martin sees this, then begins to panic, "Oh, shit I think this syringe is leaking. I'm high as f- I mean..." Martin realizes a UPU2 is sitting next to him, so he tries to cover what he said by quizzically proclaiming, "I'm... *Bi* as fuck?"

"I told you that I'm not going to touch your dick," Ronald says, putting Martin's gun in the glove compartment.

Martin shakes his head, and says, "I'm not really bi, dawg- sir."

"Drop that syringe in the back seat," Ronald calmly requests.

"Am I under arrest?" Martin asks, carefully grabbing the syringe with his fingertips, then he drops it behind his seat.

"You're... being deputized," Roland says.

"No need, I'm already Catholic," Martin responds.

Ronald furrows his brow for a moment, almost like he's rethinking this plan, but eventually relents, likely due to lack of options, and says, "You're going to be my deputy, and we have official UPU2 business to attend to. I'm looking for someone very important- a war hero- and I need your help. You know what they say, two heads are better than one."

Martin nods at this, breathing heavily, not sure what is happening, then he says, "Yeah, dawg- sir- officer. I'll help."

"We need to go downtown. Let's head to The Staples Center," Ronald says, "The Neo-Marxists might still be in possession of this war hero, and they're going to congregate downtown I hear."

Martin reaches forward and turns the key in the ignition. The SUV engine roars on, but Ronald reaches over, to pause their departure, and demands, "Put on your seat belt. You can never be too careful. One second you're behind the wheel, then next thing you know, you're flying in the air."

This wasn't something that Ronald learned from experience. This is something that his mom taught him, and Ronald is a good son. His mom would be proud if she could see him now; his mom would be disgusted if she could see him now. One mom, he picked up from church, and the



other, he argued with on a yacht. He's pleasing the right woman, and betraying a woman that deserves no mercy.

We glance at Pilot, and we understand why he was so relaxed. Ronald Taverner has everything under control.

The feed switches back to Zora's flophouse. She's on the phone, leaving a cooing voicemail message for Krysta, "Hey, hon. It's Zora. Just wanted to say I really appreciate the opportunity you've given me, and I can't wait to work together today- oh, and by the way, I think you have something of mine. You probably picked it up accidentally, but I really need you to bring it to the shoot today. Alright. I'll see you there."

Zora ends the call then immediately starts screaming, "One of my friends just texted me to say that Cyndi Pinziki was hyping up our tape while shocking Republican cocks at the sidewalk cafe. You can't buy that type of advertisement, and we lost our shit! The dumpy twins got a million dollars for their video, and we could have gotten three times that! Our video has way more buzz."

Bart Bookman steps into frame, wearing a ridiculous blue and white flowered Hawaiian shirt, and he growls, "Let's go find Cyndi and shoot her in the tits."

"Alright, let me go see Walter, and I'll buy a UPU9. Could I borrow your checkbook?"

"I buy everything with gift cards," Bart says, his gruff voice somehow making this sound sinister.

"Fair enough. You stay here and keep looking for the disc, I'm going to go visit Walter, then we can go shoot both Cyndi's *and* Krysta Now's tits, then steal the tape. It will probably be worth even more once her tits are out of commission. Think about how much 2pac's music was worth after he was shot."

"Or John Lennon," Bart adds.

"Oh, good parallel," Zora coos, "Krysta's clothing line did have that tank top that said 'Give My Piece A Chance.'"

"For that alone, she should be shot in the tits," Bart declares.

Zora grabs her purse, then storms out of the flophouse.

From a variety of security cameras, we watch her stalk the pier, searching for the ice cream truck, and eventually, she locates it near the dumpster by the old Neo-Marxist compound.

The feed switches to the truck's dashcam, and Walter, without even looking up from his newspaper, says, "Your bravery has crossed the line into stupidity, and I don't sell to stupid people."

"You don't sell to me, but will you sell to the official bank account of Zora Carmichaels?" we hear Zora ask.

"You're Zora Carmichaels," Walter states.

"I told you that we should have made up code names," Zora scolds him.

"And I told you to get the fuck out of my ice cream truck."

"I'm not in it," is Zora's response.

"For that, I am thankful," Walter says.

"Fine. I have to go make a call anyway. My friend, Nana Mae, who hired me to get reinforcements for the chaos that's slowly spreading across this great state certainly won't look kindly upon an unlicensed arms dealer who won't comply with her police state wishes. Do you think she'll appreciate that this codenameless man operates out of an ice cream truck to entice minors?" Zora questions.

After lowering his newspaper, Walter looks out the window, then says, "Meet me in the back."

Walter goes behind the curtain, and we hear him unlocking various deadbolts within the truck.

The feed switches to the camera in the back of the truck, as the rear door swings open. Walter looks down toward where Zora must be waiting, and he says, "Nana Mae would never work with Neo-Marxist scum like you."

"You're correct, Nana Mae wouldn't work with me..." we hear Zora respond, and Walter begins to shut the door, but Zora adds, "...however, she *would* work with a woman who eliminated DREAM and Dion Element for her."

"Bullshit. That was a domestic thing. I've been in many arguments with Veronica, and I know how it could drive a man to murder," Walter says, trying to explain it away.

"Oh, come on now Mr. Ice Cream Man, you sit there and you read the paper every day. When you come across a story that seems too good to be true, it must pique your curiosity. Deep down, you've always wanted DREAM and Dion to murder-suicide each other. Everyone has experienced that feeling, it's like a falling dream- it's near universal. I mean, you're... probably from an Eastern European country. You either have a personality

so off-putting that people register the disconnect as an accent, or that accent is genuine and you came from some commie state so you know what it's like to be fed lies by the government.”

“How'd you do it?” Walter asks, almost impressed with Zora because she was able to eliminate two dreadful people undetected.

“I got a secret for ya,” we hear Zora whisper loudly.

“Keep it,” Walter responds.

“You need this information,” Zora hisses, then she keeps talking, but the sound of her voice on the feed goes fainter.

Walter hops out of the truck, and on a USIDent security camera, we watch him follow Zora. Neither Zora nor Walter are mic'd so we can't hear what's being said, but we don't really need to. Since they're close to the Tidal Generator, and due to the fact they're both crazy people on their best day, an argument soon begins, and as they're acting like the two unbalanced lunatics they are, a man in a gray T-shirt and piss stained jeans stealthily makes his way around the back of the ice cream truck, then pulls the door open, and gets inside. He shuts the door behind him, tight.

Pilot taps the screen.

*“We learned that shit in boot camp. Incredible right?”*

*“Roland is a fucking ninja when his nerves are calmed.”*

“Why'd he get in the truck?” we ask.

*“Because he was tired of living in a dumpster like some Winkie's nightmare.”*

“Plus, he was chased into a dumpster by militarized UPU3 officers, so a gun might come in handy,” we add, and Pilot doesn't react to this.

Our stomach sinks when we remember that when Roland Taverner was armed, he scarred Pilot. This is why Pilot made the *Mulholland Drive* joke to bury the dark reality of it all.

Walter and Zora continue to argue, and Walter seems to have forgotten he left the door ajar so he doesn't even glance back at the truck.

“He got away with it,” we say, just so that the last thing we mentioned isn't about Roland arming himself while in an unbalanced state.

The feed reverts to the dashcam of the ice cream truck, as Roland slides into the front seat, then turns the truck on.

A glowing blue hand reaches down and puts the vehicle in drive, then Roland hits the gas, and the ice cream truck jostles as it peels out.

For a moment, we hear Walter's desperate cry for help, but it quickly gets quieter as Roland puts distance between the two of them.

Ronald Taverner is alive, and glowing, and saving lives, in transit.

The feed switches over to a rally stage that's been outfitted for an Eliot/Frost campaign stop. According to the signs that aren't political, this speech is happening directly above the Santa Monica Pier Aquarium.

We must have a direct feed from one of the cable news cameras because the frame is locked down, and the quality is perfect HD. There are no logos on the screen so we know that we're getting the unfiltered footage.

The frame is wide enough that we see both the stage, and a portion of the crowd. The audience isn't made up of the typical GOP turnout. Instead of men in business suits, and old people with nothing better to do- the crowd is filled with girls in bikinis doing body shots, and guys with Eliot/Frost written in lipstick across their hairless chests. Of note, we also spot Fortunio sweating his balls off in a velour tracksuit, and Jimmy Hermosa at the edge of the crowd, creating a large radius of open space, as he pukes so profusely and impressively that for an extended period of time we genuinely believe he's been poisoned or possessed by a demon. When the barfing ceases, Jimmy celebrates, and we realize that this is a skill he's cultivated, not an affliction that has befallen him.

It looks like it's near-night on this feed; we look to the sky, to see the rift growing larger.

A news helicopter is circling the galactic spiral, shining a spotlight into it like a cosmic OBGYN.

The feed switches to Vaughn's POV as he approaches Bobby. We know this is Vaughn's POV because of the extremely severe limp, and the background noise of a repeating, "Ow, ow, ow."

Bobby glances directly into the glasses, then asks, "You get stung by a jellyfish or somethin'?"

"Tasered in the balls," Vaughn says, the camerawork dipping and rising.

"Hooohoo," Bobby howls, with both pleasure and empathetic pain.

Vaughn looks out to the crowd, then muses, "Look at these mouth-breathers. Is this what it takes to be a reporter now? A digital recorder and a stained t-shirt? Half of them are holding ice cream cones."

"I don't want to give this speech. Things are getting fucky around here," Bobby says through his teeth.

"This rift in the sky might be making everyone loopy," Vaughn responds.

"Bullshit. That's all climate change fear mongering," Bobby says.

"I think, maybe, all decorum has been rendered null and void. Test it out. Just fuck with them. Nothing is off limits today," Vaughn says. This is Bobby's most trusted adviser, telling him to wing the speech.

"Like... how should I troll them?" Bobby asks, a glimmer in his eyes.

"Say stuff that sounds like dick jokes to fuck with Deepthroat Two," Vaughn suggests.

"I can't do that," Bobby declares, but seems unable to come up with a reason to support this declaration.

"Why can't you?" is Vaughn's simple response.

"Those faux-news shows will eat me alive."

"The cable news anchors will eat up your dick jokes."

Bobby giggles at this, then poses the childlike question, "Can I get in trouble for it?"

"No, you're the fucking presumptive VP. You can do all this shit, and in fact, you aren't even in office yet so they can't kick you out of anything. What are they going to fire you from? Doing shit-ass meet and greets with farmers and second amendment special interest groups?"

We hear Nana Mae patch into the conversation with a warning, "Vaughn, don't tempt Bobby, and also be aware that we noticed suspicious individuals videotaping the pier in a detail-oriented manner, so we've stepped up video surveillance there."

"You saw someone videoing in a concerning way, so you responded by videoing in a concerning way?" Vaughn taunts her.

"Not a concerning way, a concerned way," Nana Mae corrects him.

"Whatever," Vaughn says, then pats Bobby on the back, and tells him, "I know you have the balls to make some dick jokes."

The feed switches to the CNN network feed, as Bobby walks out onto the stage above the aquarium, to a roar of applause.

"Thank you! Thank you, Santa Monica! I love you. Ya know, I once dated a girl named Monica, but she didn't give me the gifts that the Monicas of the past have bestowed upon politicians. She was no Santa-Monica," is Bobby's opener, and everyone in the crowd laughs, except for Jimmy Hermosa who pukes.

Bobby shoots a look to Vaughn in the wings to make sure he knows that wasn't a dick joke. Monica's gift wasn't that she had a dick. She definitely had a pussy. She kept cigars in there.

From the crowd, a man calls out, "Bobby, first question, I'd like to know why your campaign didn't cancel this press conference despite the fact that the heatwave seems to be causing a stark increase in crime across the country."

"Well, honestly, I couldn't wait to cum out here today, and this is indicative of the Eliot/Frost campaign. We work long, and we work hard, to make sure that when we go in, we're as safe as possible, and we remain aware of how close we are to cumming to an event that could put us at risk," Bobby responds, instantly embracing Vaughn's challenge.

"People are saying that the pier is understaffed for security, and a woman was shot there mere hours ago."

"The pier is a soft target, and we need to get it hard," Bobby says.

"What!?" someone from the audience calls out.

"I've heard there are concerns that our security can be penetrated and if that act should occur, we want to make sure that it's on camera for the world to see. We will catch every penetration that happens on our beautiful beaches," Bobby adds.

"So there will be an increase in UPU staffing at all levels?" someone yells out.

"We need a lot more men to surround this soft target, and we need increased video options so we have multiple angles if the site is penetrated," Bobby says.

"Sir, may I ask if this entire press conference up to this point has been euphemisms?" a lady calls out.

"No. I'm not a dickhead. I wouldn't do that," Bobby says.

"I have to admit, it's difficult to tell if this is a disaster or if you're nailing this press conference and you just won my once-undecided vote," another person yells.

Everyone is silent, then Bobby, pleased with himself, ends the press conference by saying, "I want to thank the people of the Southland for hosting me these past couple days, as I've stumped long and hard for the Eliot/Frost campaign. Just in case you missed it, I'll summarize our campaign here. One- that everyone deserves freedom, two- that I will protect your freedoms, three- Fluid Karma will keep us out of wars, four-

that my opponent knows nothing about technology and she probably can't even manage her e-mails, five- that we need to increase spending for USIDent to ensure that we can hold all those who do wrong accountable..." Bobby takes a deep breath, and quickly adds, "...then points six through nine are basically just that teen horniness must be decriminalized. Thank you, Calipornia!"

The CNN feed cuts back into the studio where a newscaster in thick glasses looks into the camera, and says, "Clearly a rousing speech from Senator Bobby Frost."

"I, for one, am grossly offended by the misogyny of this bigot-" some fat Latina woman starts yammering, as a pink phallic outline of the state of California surrounded by vibration lines appears on the screen, and instead of listening to the CNN outrage machine churn out garbage, like a Tidal Generator that powers nothing beyond girls with blue hair, we look up to the rift, and we see that plastic bags and pieces of paper are being sucked into it.

When they finally get the fat Latina calmed down, the guy with thick glasses begins reading the teleprompter, "Just in case you felt your bed rocking this morning, and it wasn't related to a situation that Bobby Frost would give a speech on, you might have felt one of the several small earthquakes which have been reported off the coast of California. Seismologists are warning Southland residents of a possible massive earthquake, noting tidal disturbances emanating from the Utopia 3 facility on the Pacific coast."

*"As it was foretold by farts."*

Pilot's joke is a sad state of the union. A candidate on a presidential ticket just made a press conference full of dick jokes, then we watched a report of earthquakes that were predicted by a porn star's fart-ridden spec script.

"The farting baby was a stupid mechanism, even by Krysta Now standards," we say, holding onto our sanity, "Someone should have stepped in and stopped it. We're not going to sit up here and be like 'I love the smell of baby farts in the morning' nope. Not doing it."

*"There's a reason I'm reading The Bible up here, and not The Power."*

"It's frustrating because it's almost like Fortunio could look at the screenplay, and immediately let them know the baby stuff is dumb. I mean

they have a co-writer in Boxer Santaros, who doesn't have that Hollywood groupthink because he barely has memories, so why isn't there something in his head that goes, 'Oh, this is a very, very dumb idea. This farting baby thing, even for someone who knows nothing of the world, doesn't work.'

*"It's a metaphor."*

We're quiet for a moment, then suddenly we see ourselves as that dumb, four-hundred-dollar haircut sporting executive that doesn't understand the screenplay, while everyone else at the meeting does.

Things begin to click on why the farting baby remains in the screenplay, and we say, "Oh. Oh, shit. It's like how, in the Bible, a complicated concept is made simple so that even morons can understand it, and the message reaches the widest audience possible."

*"But even accounting for those morons, there are people who interpret everything so strictly that the information- the vital information in The Bible- is not only overlooked, it's deemed sacrilege to extol. Even if people do get the point, they have to pretend they don't so they aren't cast out."*

"So sometimes the executive *does* understand the screenplay- it's the audience that doesn't- and he has to pretend like he never understood the script in the first place to not seem out of touch with the audience."

*"LA has taught you well."*

We feel a sense of accomplishment and belonging, until Pilot follows up his statement:

*"Tell me how it's a metaphor."*

Pilot is calling us on our shit, just like we tried to do with the baby.

Carefully, we parse out how the farting baby could be a metaphor, "...the Earth is the baby... and we're the retarded parents, shooting ourselves up with drugs, and shooting each other with bullets. And, uh... we're putting this baby in harm's way as it physically warns us- with these massive vibrations- that something inside is very wrong, and we need to all work together to figure out what that is. We need to heed the warnings, before the Earth ruptures, and its toxic gas kills us all."

*"That, right there- that ability to catalog everything, and think through it, then rethink the opinion you had formed- that's why I'm glad you went out of your way to connect with me."*



“Remember yesterday, in the Mariasol, when that guy gave you his table?” we ask.

*“He gave both of us his table.”*

“Yeah, but there was this moment where he didn't look at what he was doing for you as a favor, he acted as though he was *returning* a favor. Watching this screen feels like that- like it's a favor being returned, not a favor being granted.”

*“I believe it was destiny.”*

“You could have instantly found someone else to watch your screen with you.”

*“But would they have gotten off that turret and followed me into a rioting LA?”*

“Probably not.”

*“But you...”*

“Just say the word.”

Pilot nods at this, and pivots the turret, an electronic voice announcing the shift.

Instead of looking at what's caught his attention, we look to the feed, but what we see is obviously being filmed from a rifle sight- a different sight than Pilot's- so we accept that danger is everywhere and today there will be no averted eyes for the sake of mental health. The focus of the rifle sight on the screen is Bart and Zora, and if it *had* to be someone, honestly, at least it's them. Officer Bart Bookman is a murderer, and karma's a bitch.

The duo cuts through a tourist crowd that seems to be getting drunker and angrier by the moment. Because of the Tidal Generator's foggy smog blocking the sun, there's an ominous blue glow to everything- like we're in a perma-dusk on the hottest night of the year.

We don't have specific audio on the feed- only general crowd noise.

We see Bart pointing to a table that has the *NOW* logo on it, and atop the table are stacks of two items- energy drinks and rice cakes. This is the craft services for Krysta's show. Zora disappears into the crowd for a moment, and whoever is holding the rifle gets distracted by tiny multicolored tank tops that read “NOW.”

The feed switches from the overhead rifle sight view, to the camera that's currently filming Krysta as she slips through the crowd. We have an audio feed, which is pretty decent so Zora's presence here diminishes from vaguely-practical to fully-menacing.

The *NOW* girls look supremely confident in what may not only be the final episode of their show, but the final episode of non-news TV in general.

Shoshana, in a green tank top, her bra peeking out, says, "This is so revolutionary, Krysta. I mean, a reality show of what goes on behind-the-scenes of a reality show."

Sheena, in a blue tank top, bra peeking out, says, "Cyndi said we can't do that."

"Do what?" Krysta, in a pink tank top, bra peeking out, asks.

"Reference the reality show, while we're filming the behind the scenes of the reality show," Sheena responds.

Deena scrunches her nose, then says, "Oh, but I thought this was a porno version of 30 Rock."

Krysta shakes her pigtailed blonde wig back and forth in disagreement, then says, "We were going to market it as that, but Vivid already put out 30 Cock and they said we would be infringing."

"How was 30 Cock?" Sheena asks, a little interested.

"Pretty impressive. A girl sucked 37 dicks," Krysta says.

"In a row?" Deena asks, in her Jersey accent.

"Yes, of course in a row," Krysta responds, "Modern productions don't have the budget for a multi-day shoot."

"Wow, I bet she had to start sucking dick the moment she arrived in the parking lot," Shoshana says, with a certain reverence.

"Yeah, it was total commitment on her part. She was only supposed to suck 30 dicks, but when you're shooting in a parking lot sometimes dudes just show up, and everyone knows that when you're in the vertex of a dick hurricane- you're not checking the casting sheet," Krysta reminds the girls.

The cameraman shooting this is backing up, and we see the feed jostle, then Sheena barks at a gross woman as they pass her, "Hey, Jabba, be careful around our Steadicam."

"That's not a real Steadicam," Krysta tells Sheena, with the same type of scolding she should have provided when Sheena demeaned the woman.

"Sorry, Krysta. You're so smart with production stuff like this. You really are an inspiration to me," Sheena apologizes, then Krysta spots a bar to her right, and says, "Oh, look at that! Those guys have a vodka ice luge in the shape of a dick! That is super on-brand for us. Let's go in there and put our mouths on it!"

"We can't. Only the Hermosa Magic Store and The Poop Deck would let us get a permit to film," we hear the cameraman say, faintly.

"But, we're, like, hot," all of the girls say at once.

"Yeah, but everyone just thinks that this reality show about the behind the scenes of your talk show is actually just a BTS scene for porno," the cameraman explains.

"Wow, how do we know it isn't though?" Sheena asks, her mind blown.

All of the girls try to process this, and we can see their brains grappling with the boundaries of BTS.

"Wild. I can't predict when I'm going to cum, and Nana Mae Frost has her goons filming everything, so is every moment of our lives that we're not fucking actually a BTS for a porno?" Shoshana muses.

"That's so deep," Deena notes incorrectly.

"It's like, now, everyone is a porn performer, but not everyone is a pornstar," Sheena muses.

Thankfully, the girls reach The Poop Deck, and the cameraman backs them inside.

*Of course*, The Poop Deck is the one bar that would offer I Want It Now Productions a permit.

The *NOW* girls drift inside The Poop Deck, and Krysta surveys the crowd, but she doesn't seem to find what she wants, so she says, "Okay, so you know on The Real World how the episodes are only interesting when everyone is shitfaced? We need to do that for this reality show or everyone will hate us."

"I don't want people to hate us just as much as I do want tequila so I think this plan is genius," Deena acknowledges.

"Be careful, tequila is like liquid face-punch inspiration," Sheena warns.

"Don't be so dismissive. Punched faces are one of the best things a reality show can have," Deena counters.

"But I'm so happy with my nose job," Krysta whines.

"Then drink responsibly and I'll punch any face that's connected to a body which tries to punch your face," Deena tells her.

Overwhelmed by this kind gesture, and due to the fact that all of the *NOW* girls are together on this very special holiday, Krysta says, "Aw, I love you girls... and tequila!"

“Who's going to buy us tequila?” Deena yells across The Poop Deck, and at least six different men sitting at the bar shift their weight, take out their wallets, then hold out cash to the bartender.

There's some confusion on if the bar even serves tequila, but everything is so chaotic and sweaty that the camera begins to spin in an A.D.D. whirl, and eventually a bottle of tequila is passed to Sheena, and shot glasses are passed to Shoshana, and a circle forms around the girls as they hammer tequila shots, like they're Mexican vikings instead of pornstars.

The humid energy inside The Poop Deck escalates at breakneck speed with tequila as its Liquid Karma.

Every single man who started their day listlessly sitting on their stool, watching the bubbles in their Bud Light rise, is now standing and watching the NOW girls tear shit up in the best way possible.

Over the sound system, “Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime” begins to play. Shrieks peak the mics and we wonder if Zora will show up to lay down the audio law. The girls drink, and the song repeats, and the camera lens gradually gets covered in more beer and lime juice from the girls chasing shots.

When the song ends, the girls chant, “One more time! Not a crime!” and whoever is controlling the jukebox complies with this request.

Once the cameraman wipes off the lens, Krysta begins to sing, and the NOW girls stand evenly apart and perform what, quite possibly, could be the dance that they will also perform on the Jenny von Westphalen tonight.

About a minute in, the music slows to half the tempo, which seems impossible because we're getting the feed live from the camera and the jukebox wouldn't be able to stretch a song like this, but it's happening, so we have to accept it, and the girls slide forward, leading with their hips, then form a square and begin to curtsy at the bar patrons. They return back to the evenly spaced formation, then one-by-one, they approach the camera. First Deena, then Sheena, then Shoshana, and finally Krysta. She makes the same little heart gesture to the camera that she made to Bobby Frost in the grand library of the Treer mansion when he sang along with her.

After Krysta returns to the NOW girls, they get behind her, so that they're in a single file line, then they move in a curling formation, like segments in a snake that's slithering toward the camera.

*“Teen Horniness is not a crime  
Open your heart, and your mind  
Teen Horniness is on the rise  
Look inside and you will find  
Teen Horniness is not a crime”*

We watch breathlessly as Shoshana, at the head of the “snake” gets down on her knees, then Sheena and Deena lunge to opposite sides, also ending up on their knees.

Each of the *NOW* girls slithers their arms around their middles, just as the men want to do with them, then they slide their hands down to their hips, and shake their ass while still on their knees.

Again their hands raise, moving up their body, then over their breasts. As their fingertips meet in the middle of their chest, their hands lock together, and they swing their arms to their left. They mimic this action to their right, then raise their locked hands to the sky and hold the pose.

With the three girls behind her, frozen, Krysta steps forward, and holds out her arms like she's waiting for a hug that, even with the imbalances today, no man in the room is brave enough to attempt.

*“Open your heart  
and your mind  
'Cause the numbers don't lie  
Observe the nerds  
who shot up Columbine, yeah  
Did they ever get laid?  
No. They never got laid  
Never got laid. Never got laid.  
An overcrowded nation  
All your legislation  
Can't stop teens' masturbation”*

Sheena makes a move toward Krysta and nearly falls but Krysta spins around with a speed that tells us she was either watching the monitor, or her clairvoyance allowed her to know this would happen. Sheena locks hands with Krysta, and being professionals when it comes to changing positions at a moment's notice, they begin to slow dance. This time, they go cheek-to-cheek, instead of ass-to-ass, and they waltz forward. Maybe it's

because of the fogged lens and the fatigue of all the drunks in the bar, but the song almost seems to further slow in tempo to join them in their waltz. The adrenaline and horniness that the bar pumps with seems to be close to tapping out, like a finite resource, and everyone, with heavy eyelids and seasick posture, watches Sheena and Krysta dance.

The song stops playing and the women stop dancing and everyone looks at each other, almost as though the disruption caused by Utopia 3 and the Tidal Generator has been temporarily lifted. It's a moment of clarity.

Krysta raises her arms, her body slick like Britney's in the "Slave 4 U" video, and everyone in the bar is watching this in the way that Krysta hoped her poetry would have gone over back at Wild Bill's.

Action instead of words- this is one of our lessons from our vacation.

We were taught this by a porn star and an action star- by a disgraced soldier and a wounded vet- by a soon-to-be grandpa and a worried mother.

This peerless calm is suddenly terrorized by Zora and Bart pushing through the crowd, while Zora screams at Krysta, "She stole from me! Stop her!"

Krysta backs up, then she turns to a man who seems to have the strength and anger to take on Zora- mainly due to the fact he's wearing a shirt that says, 'Wife beater' on it, and the shirt is a T-shirt. "Sir, those people are trying to kill me," Krysta says, pointing at Zora and Bart.

Bart reaches into his waistband, as Zora flicks her wrist, extending out some sort of bizarre fighting cane that she probably got from Walter because all his other weapons are currently in transit.

"Whoa," the wife beater guy says, and we're pretty sure it's just because he thinks this is all setting up an S&M thing and Zora is one of the *NOW* girls who is going to dom him.

"Get the fuck out of my way, you dolt," Zora screams, but she's promptly thrown against the wall by the "wife beater."

"Do you know who we are?" Zora yells, then Bart puts his UPU9 to the wife beater's temple, and says, "Your worst nightmare."

The wife beater raises his hands, not willing to catch a bullet for a porn star, and he lets Bookman throw him to the ground.

The cameraman nearly trips over his own feet as he films Krysta and the Now-girls rushing out of the bar, while Zora yells at them, "What's your hurry, bitch?"

This brief scene in The Poop Deck serves as the perfect distillation of an entire night at the bar, with Zora and Bart's arrival as the blinding disruption that occurs when the house-lights come on.

Watching this pandemonium unfold, we're not totally clear what Bart and Zora are trying to accomplish here. We know they need their disc back, but this is probably one of the dumbest ways they could go about getting it.

We'd blame it on the rift if we didn't know that Bart's thought process almost always boils down to, *That which displeases me deserves a bullet.*

Bart gives chase behind the girls, while the drunks don't hold Zora back because they aren't willing to get arrested since Krysta Now is gone and they're left to dwell on how much money they spent on her bar tab.

The feed flips to the rifle sight of the soldier atop The Strand. Pilot will likely be transferred to this post after today's event, assuming there's a tomorrow.

As the girls flee through the outdoor seating area behind The Poop Deck, Bart jumps up onto the table, then holds his UPU9 in one hand, and his badge in the other, as he yells at the crowd, "Catch those bitches or catch a bullet!"

A millisecond after Bart makes this declaration, the feed jolts, and we watch as a 50 cal round tears through Bart's chest. With no UPU vest to save him- only a thin Hawaiian shirt and a decent pair of man-tits- Bart falls off the picnic table. He's definitely super dead.

We notice the sight jostle as the soldier reloads, then we hear the digital voice announcing that the turret is pivoting.

"Fascist pigs!" Zora yells in reaction to Bart's shooting, and the feed jolts again, as Zora gets shot in the tits as well. For flying too close to the sun, Zora ends up on her back, leaking bodily fluids- but not in the Krysta Now way.

This Strand marksman is making damn sure that everyone is able to safely browse through an extensive book selection without fear of Neo-Marxists judging their purchases.

"Please disperse. Please disperse. Please disperse," repeats over a loudspeaker in a calm, yet authoritative voice, and the crowd tramples each other to comply with this request.

With Krysta safe, and some pretty good footage in the can for her TV show, the feed switches to the dashcam of Martin Kefauver's SUV.

Martin is still driving, still paranoid, and salt lines of sweat are now ringing his do-rag.

Ronald is still in the passenger seat, and his hand is still glowing.

Gripping the wheel at ten and two, Martin makes a disclaimer, "I just want to say, I really respect what you-"

"-why do you want to kill yourself?" Ronald interrupts him.

In the first genuine moment we've seen from Martin, he looks over at Ronald, and he says, without a hint of Ebonics, "I got drafted. I have to go to Iraq, or Afghanistan, or maybe Syria. I'm not built for it, in many ways- I can't handle the training, and I can't handle the uncertainty, and I can't handle the responsibility. I'd rather put a bullet in my head, quick and painless."

"Fallujah is bad," Ronald says, instead of trying to talk him out of the easy- yet-complicated exit he's still considering.

Martin glances over at him, then asks, "You were in Iraq?"

"I think," Ronald says, and this is absurd enough that Martin's equally absurd faux identity returns, and he asks, "Yo, how'd you get out, dawg?"

"That's none of your business," Ronald says, with his UPU2 authority backing his words, then he adds, "You should try and cross the border into Mexico."

"Yo, my dad confiscated my interstate travel visa because he saw my browser history, dawg."

"It doesn't matter," Ronald says, and this makes us wonder if he knows that the world will be ending today.

Martin scoffs, "How does it not matter?"

"Interstate travel visas have been frozen- the government issued a code red terror alert for the holiday weekend. I saw it on the UPU2 wire this morning."

"So how the fuck are we going to get to Mexico?" Martin asks, no longer looking at Ronald as a UPU2.

"You know what they say..." Ronald responds, then flashes a smile at Martin, "...when on the way to Mexico, do as the Mexicans do, and bribe everyone you come in contact with, then sneak over the poorly secured border."

The feed switches to Boxer, in an elevator that might be inside Treer Tower 1, and when it reaches the 14th floor, he steps out. The screen shows



us a hallway camera, as Boxer begins making his way down a pure white hallway, his bare feet sinking into a blood red carpet.

Boxer reaches the end of the hallway, and faces a door. He doesn't even try the handle- something inside him demands that he reverse his course, so that's exactly what he does. When he's halfway to the elevator, his phone rings, and instead of panicking like he did every other time we saw him get a call, he flips it open, and merely says, "Cane here."

"Cane?" we hear Madeline's voice on the other end of the line.

As soon as Madeline responds, Boxer's eyes go wide, and in a nerdy-sounding voice, Boxer asks, "Cannn I help you?"

"Why are you talking like that?" Madeline asks.

Boxer turns back toward the end of the hallway, then sighs, and says, "Open your door."

"Ugh, fine," Madeline responds, then after a moment of silence, we hear the deadbolt get flipped. Boxer, instead of walking back to the door, stands frozen, and he looks down at his phone.

"Boxer?" we hear Madeline softly say.

Making a decision, Boxer snaps his phone shut, then walks down the hall toward Madeline's hotel room.

The moment he steps inside the room, the feed switches to a static shot of a bed, because that must be where the TV is pointed.

We can't see Boxer and Madeline in the entryway, but we can hear the troubled couple bicker, and part of us wishes that Boxer would take his driver's advice, and tell Madeline that today is the last day on Earth for both of them and they don't want to spend it hating each other. Even if he had intentions to do this, it's hard for him to get a word in edgewise though as Madeline rants, "How could you leave again, you dickhead? You absolute dickhead."

"I had to take a drive to clear my head because... these past couple days... things have been foggier than the base of the Tidal Generator," Boxer says, appearing on the left side of the screen, then making his way to the bed.

Behind him, is a painting of a red, white, and blue American flag that's split down the center, both equal sections of the flag occupying its own frame. The color on the flag is so bright that it seems to glow on the laptop screen.

"You hurt me. Bad," we hear Madeline say, and this makes Boxer hurt bad too- we can see it on his face. He always wears his emotions in his expressions, and his expression right now is a tight grimace- his eyes squinting, his teeth gritted.

"I am truly sorry for disappearing," Boxer assures her.

"Are you though?" Madeline asks, walking into frame, but she remains standing, with her back to the lens, so we can't see her expression, but we do see her super-long legs, and very awesome ass.

"I am sorry," Boxer says plainly, as clearly as he can.

"If you had to do it over-"

"-I would."

"You would what, Boxer? That's the bitch of all this- I feel like I don't even know you anymore," Madeline admits, then walks to the other side of the frame, mumbling, "Maybe *I'm* the bitch of all this."

"I would leave again if I had a second chance," Boxer says.

"Why?" Madeline asks, the betrayal weighing her voice down, but she remains standing.

"Because I had to leave. It was how things were meant to be," Boxer says, like he's realizing this as he tells her.

"How do you know what's 'meant to be?'" Madeline snips at him.

"Because..." we see Boxer struggling regarding how much to reveal. He looks up at his wife, and he smiles, then he bails on explaining himself, saying, "Let's get dressed for the event."

Madeline drifts over to Boxer, and says, "I'd like to, but honestly I'm convinced that when I go shower, you'll just leave again."

Boxer stands up, then says, "Guess we'll have to take a shower together so I can't escape."

We get pretty bummed when the feed changes to helicopter footage of downtown LA because Madeline Frost-Santaros is really fucking hot and the Tidal Generator, combined with the ever-expanding rift is making our lizard brain instincts peak.

When we saw the Now Girls dance, we were turned on.

When we saw Bart Bookman get shot, it felt like justice.

When we saw Madeline Frost-Santaros' ass on the laptop screen, we felt horny.

We notice in our periphery that Pilot is looking up at the sky, so we join him.

*"We saw the shadows of the morning light... the shadows of the evening sun... until the shadows and the light were one."*

"That's from The Book of Revelation?" we ask.

*"Nah. Jane's Addiction."*

Through a laugh at our incorrect ID, we ask, "What does it mean though?"

*"It all ends tonight."*

"It can't end tonight," we say.

*"I didn't say what ends tonight."*

We look to the Tidal Generator, as it stands in the middle of an onslaught, and we say, "The waves are getting choppy."

*"We'll have to leave the turret at some point soon."*

"When will that be?"

*"I guess when the footage stops playing."*

"That long?"

*"You want to get an early-dinner?"*

"Last meal?" we say jokingly.

*"Yeah. Last Meal."*

The way Pilot parrots us doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel good. We stand up, and he stands up, then he picks up his Bible, and pops the laptop out of the stand.

The waves crash behind us, and the people on the beach scream like school children at recess.

We climb down from the roof and walk into the Mariasol. The hair on our neck stands on end when we scan the restaurant and see that it's completely empty. Pilot makes his way to the kitchen, and we follow like a dog.

*"You like steaks?"*

We don't have to answer this question, and Pilot immediately goes to work, eyeing the setup of the kitchen to get acclimated.

Once he has his bearings, he sets up the laptop so that he can glance at it during his food prep.

On the screen, a helicopter buzzing above the city is moving toward ominous plumes of black smoke.

There's already meat out on the metal counter- raw steaks- one of them has a bite taken out of it- a human-looking bite. Pilot grabs a knife, flips the

chomped steak away, then grabs two raw steaks by hand and slaps them down on a cutting board. He reaches for a pillar of seasoning and begins applying it, because he knows that we will forever follow his lead with a curiosity that shows just how much we trust him.

“Are you going to say goodbye to Roland?” we ask, because it seems deeply important.

As Pilot peppers the steaks, he fights a mental battle. He flips the steaks over, and eyeballs their raw, spiceless side. He pauses for a moment, turning to us.

*“Do you want to know what happened when I saw Ronald Taverner? I, uh...”*

Pilot leans on the steel table he's in front of, and he laughs something close to a sob.

*“I... thought that... I could have a second chance with my best friend.”*

Pilot's scar trembles as he winces at this.

*“Do you remember that night that Ronald Taverner was staring at the public service ad of me that they made for returning soldiers?”*

“Pimps don't commit suicide,” we say, maybe as a reminder for him.

*“You left that night, and I stayed. After you climbed off the roof, and walked to that PSA, I wrestled with what I should do, then I left my post, and I walked to find Ronald Taverner.”*

“And you spoke with him?”

Pilot nods.

“And he spoke to you?”

Pilot nods again.

“And how did it make you feel?”

*“It made me feel like I was back with my friend in the barracks, and I thought to myself... ha... For a minute there, I wished that the war went on forever.”*

“There are so many new wars. This is true on a soldier-level, as well as a cellular-level,” we point out.

*“When I was standing on that street corner with Ronald, and he wasn't sure where my scar was from... I wanted to get in that fucking mega-zeppelin and fly that son of a*

*bitch into the time rift, hoping I would come out back in Fallujah, with my best friend, and I would make sure that he didn't commit the accident that ruined his life."*

"Wasn't it you who suggested that everyone stop focusing on the past and start worrying about the future?"

*"I am worried about the future..."*

Pilot grabs two skillets, then places them on the industrial burners. He cranks the heat, flicks in some butter, then drops the steaks into the sizzling skillets.

*"...I'm also curious if the future can take me back to the past."*

After Pilot says this, we glance at the laptop screen, and we see Inga von Westphalen. She's dressed in a black cloak of a dress, as though she's about to commence a dark arts ritual.

Serpentine walks into the frame, joining Inga in a pure-white room. We believe that this is taking place on the Jenny von Westphalen. The Kubrickian design of the room is exactly the way a company like Treer would pull 2001 into 2008.

There are no windows in the room- no way to tell if these two women are floating above the city- and the possibility arises that the mega-zeppelin has already been launched, without Boxer Santaros aboard.

In a shiny, gasoline-puddle-colored, cleavage-baring dress, Serpentine stands at the far right of the frame; Inga stands at the far left. Serpentine's eyelashes are like spider legs, her eyeshadow like an endangered panda; Inga's lipstick is cherry red and seeping into the cracks of her wrinkles like blood spilled on a tile floor. Serpentine smokes her Cruella de Vil cigarette; Inga drinks from a highball glass that's almost certainly filled with vodka. They wish each other congratulations, for seemingly different reasons. Each of their accents gives their words a sinister slice that isn't present when Baron's distinctly American and somewhat-sloppy delivery is there to balance things out.

"Are you finally ready to accept da future?" Serpentine asks, looking into the lens of the perfect HD feed.

"We aren't ready," Inga says, looking at Serpentine's perfect profile.

"You cannot stop halfway there, Inga. You have been given an opportunity... seize it."

"Cease what?" Inga asks, confused.

"Seize it," Serpentine says, making no additional attempts at improving her pronunciation.

Inga catches on, then says, "We *are* seizing it, but we must strike a delicate balance."

"Seeking balance is what has made us weak. Balance and equality do not sustain power," Serpentine declares, "When propagating imbalance, we will thrive; when suffering in equality, we will be overthrown."

Inga frowns, sips her vodka, then says, "You don't understand the risk of what you're suggesting."

"We've had a conversation like dis many times before," Serpentine says, in an exhale of smoke.

Inga raises her glass to the sagging jowl on the right side of her face, then she asks, "Have we?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When I suggested we dig and dig, and drill and drill, until we located the elixir of power," Serpentine says, "You were careful to da point of impotence, while I was not. Who do you feel was correct, in da end?"

Inga sighs, "Well, it sounded made up. I mean, it was named after you, for starters."

"It was named after me, by me, because da plan was mine, and da results are mine as well," Serpentine states.

"You haven't told me how you knew the trench existed," Inga says, with an obvious curiosity.

Serpentine exhales two large smoke rings, then says, "I knew it existed because I could feel it under me as I ventured back and forth in da Earth."

With a bitchy expression of pleasure on her face, Inga says, "Or you rose up from the Earth and noticed it when you passed by."

"Perhaps," is Serpentine's simple response.

"The exact moment I felt willing to make a deal with the devil, you appeared," Inga acknowledges.

Serpentine, with the hand that isn't holding the cigarette, lifts her orange tinged bangs, and we realize that she hasn't been wearing a wig after all. We thought she was the counterpoint to Krysta and they were both wearing wigs, trying to be someone else. Looking directly at Inga, Serpentine asks, "Would you like to check my forehead for horns?"

"No," Inga says, then downs the rest of her vodka.

“Why?”

“Because if I saw them, that would mean my son is sleeping with the devil.”

Serpentine makes a clicking noise between her teeth, then reminds Inga, “You demanded dat Baron yield power, and *dat* is power.”

“*That* is toxic,” Inga says, and she doesn't strike us as a woman of faith, but she does strike us as a woman of common sense.

“How often da two go hand-in-hand. Everything has a byproduct, Inga. You can't avoid da waste. Bad is born from good. After all, weren't you implying I was cast out?”

Inga begins moving toward Serpentine, and instead of Serpentine's smooth moves, Inga's approach is jerky and frail. Her words, however, are not weak, as she says, “Possibly that's why you want to travel back into that rift. If He won't pull you back up, you'll ascend.”

Again, we witness someone who doesn't view the rift as a sign of the end, but instead, as the chance for a fresh beginning.

“Is dat what you really think? Dat I'm trying to sneak into Heaven on your backs?” Serpentine asks.

“I can't trust you,” Inga states, and based on her expression, we don't think she expected to say this aloud.

“You already have, Ms. von Westphalen, so unless you can go back and change dat, you are with me in dis.”

Pilot turns back to the stove top, and flips the steaks, then watches them sizzle, instead of watching Serpentine sizzle, and we ask, “This isn't blowing your mind?”

“No.”

“Because you've already seen it before?”

*“Because I've been well aware that both of these women are lunatics long before this. Lunatics behaving and bickering like lunatics is not an event.”*

“What if we sound like that to people?”

“We do.”

“No,” we say, pulling Pilot's attention away from the steaks, “There's a logic- no matter how supernatural- to what they're saying in that room. If Serpentine is a fallen angel, she probably knows that she can't just show up at Heaven's gate- but maybe she could try to buy her way back into heaven with a group of souls, packed into one of the most efficient upwardly

mobile vehicles for a ritualistic mass-death. That's why it had to be a mega-zeppelin all along. The Treer Corporation was building military zeppelins, but Serpentine easily could've pitched using them for citizens- for the innocents. A mega-zeppelin can be packed with people, and they can be sat down at dinner, as whores entertain them, while they rise up into a rift that Serpentine created to get into Heaven, just as she traveled through a rift up from hell."

*"If they go into that rift, good riddance."*

"You aren't giving any of this credence? I mean, Serpentine is the dragon, Krysta is the whore-"

*"-whoa there!"*

"Relax, we mean in the Biblical sense."

*"It still feels reductive."*

On cue, the girl we easily associated with being a whore appears on the screen, with her legion of backup whores. The *NOW* girls are sitting in a row, and they're all in robes that, bizarrely, match the color of the tank tops they wore at the *NOW* shoot. They seem to be identified by their colors, like they're the *Now-Whore* Rangers.

"Uh, they seem relaxed considering they were running from a gunman like twenty minutes ago."

"That was a lot longer than twenty minutes ago."

We feel another time dilation- maybe it's the tidal fog blocking the sun, or maybe we're speeding toward an end that will arrive in a blink.

Baron enters the frame, and even though we know that he's booked the girls, we wince at this image. In a reserved voice, Baron says, "I can't wait to see what you have prepared for us, Miss Now."

"Likewise Baron," Krysta responds.

Instead of believing that time might be impacted by the rift, we begin to question if this moment has been edited into the footage. It doesn't take place outside, and there are no markers that indicate this footage is taking place on the 4th. Sure, they are discussing what they have planned, but no one said 'tonight' in the interaction.

There is also the chance that we are watching live footage. It wouldn't be that hard for Krysta and the girls to take the *Nowmobile* down to the warehouse by The Staples Center. Since we've driven enough during our vacation, we can estimate that with July 4th traffic, to go from The Poop Deck to The Staples Center, they'd have to take the 105 to the 110, and it



would be, on a good day, an hour-and-a-half, and on a day where no one is obeying traffic signals, an hour flat.

Time accelerates.

We understand that soon the sun will set, and the mega-zeppelin will rise, and the Earth will...

We watch on the screen as Baron clasps his hands together, then says, "Ladies, next time I see you, we will be in the clouds!"

Knowing how to treat a patron of her services, Krysta says, "I feel safe in the sky with you, Mr. von Westphalen."

"Nothing's safer than a zeppelin," Deena says, then rolls her eyes.

"That's the point, Miss... Krysta's friend. Treer built a zeppelin to prove just how far mankind has come! All of you have been given a very special gift in your admittance onto this mega-zeppelin. For once, in a complete reversal of fortunes, everyone *not* in a zeppelin will be in danger."

"What the fuck does that mean?" we ask.

*"I think it means we're in trouble."*

Pilot picks up his knife, then slices through the first steak like it's an Asian businessman's arm. Seemingly pleased with what he sees, he stabs the steak, then lifts it toward us to show us the medium well center. We nod in approval, and he checks the second steak, then moves both of them to plates.

The feed flips away from Krysta and Baron, to helicopter footage of fires- *multiple* fires, in the same frame.

As further darkness falls upon the city, Neo-Marxist cells continue to converge upon downtown, so we converge upon the dining room, with our meal for our last bit of peace before we join those mindless ideologues.

We can't sit by the window because the waves are so extreme now that they're splashing the windows of the raised restaurant.

Before Pilot sits down at a table in the center of the Mariasol, he takes a moment to watch the wild ocean just outside.

*"Wind's blowin' up a gale today."*

"Who could have predicted it?" we say, with sarcasm, as we set the laptop down on the table.

Pilot delivers the steaks like a waiter, then goes back into the kitchen. After a moment of searching, he returns with two Budweisers.

"Won't we have to drive tonight?" we ask.

*"Worried about a DWI?"*

"No, about not being able to avoid a collision in the sea of destruction derby madness."

*"Watch the screen."*

Pilot cracks open his beer, then drinks half of it in a head-back gulp we recognize from how Boxer was drinking earlier in the day.

We sit down at the table, and Pilot does the same. We pick up our fork, and Pilot does the same.

"Should we say a prayer?" we ask.

*"Yeah, but we need to save it for when it's most needed."*

We sit together, and enjoy our steaks, watching the laptop screen as Boxer and Madeline stand with their backs to a pure-white wall and stare directly into the lens of the camera we're watching them from. A bright flash goes off, and it must be a security camera that takes their image, then scans it in a 3D model, like what they have at the airport.

"Welcome to Club Jenny on the Treer mega-zeppelin," a synthesized woman's voice announces from the ceiling, then requests, "Please place your thumb on the scanner for security purposes."

After handing a paper invite to a woman wearing all black, Madeline puts her thumb on a touchpad to the right of a laptop.

A beep allows Madeline to proceed, then Boxer places his finger on the pad. The same beep permits him to continue on, so he steps out of frame.

The feed flicks to the next security camera, which observes a tall metal detector.

Boxer steps in front of Madeline and passes under the archway of a scanner.

Immediately, an alarm whoops, and a red light bathes Boxer. He raises his hands, like he's giving up, but then we hear crystal clear audio as he explains, "Metal cufflinks."

A black man in a suit, who's watching the entrance at the far left of the frame steps forward, and for a second we think he's reaching for handcuffs to detain Boxer, but instead, he removes his wallet, then takes out what looks like a clear credit card. He swipes the card along the side of the detector's terminal, then the digital voice says, "Override approved. Clearance granted."

"Those are very nice cufflinks, Mr. Santaros," an overweight guard tells Boxer, then motions for him to clear the way for his wife.

Madeline is next to step into the metal detector, and it goes off again. She hands the guard her purse, walks back under the metal detector, and this time, it doesn't make a noise. As the guard gives her the purse back, Madeline asks, "You aren't going to check inside it?"

"Already have," the guard responds, and Madeline looks disturbed by this, but then she seems to remember her last name, and her mother's legacy. She isn't allowed to harbor any privacy-violation outrage. She's given up that right.

Walking shoulder-to-shoulder through a bright white corridor, but never touching, the couple is ready to appear in a public capacity for the first time in over a week. Boxer is clearly trying to act cool, while Madeline is holding her purse, tapping her fingers on it. This anxiety-fraught finger dance is one of the few things that this couple shares.

"I don't think it was the cufflinks setting off that alarm," Madeline says out of the side of her mouth, as the couple steps into a portion of the megazepplin that appears to be a long skinny nightclub with a bar on the left, and circular booths on the right.

"You always did have good intuition," Boxer responds.

"Wish I could say the same about you," Madeline continues the hushed fight.

"I work off my intuition. I analyze the scene. I make judgment calls. I was a UPU2 officer for over nine hours. I saw two people get shot."

"Must have been a slow day for them," Madeline snarks.

"Don't let your mother hear you joking about her police state," Boxer warns, then begins looking around for the cameras. All of the fixtures above the party are large lighted bulbs, and Boxer seems to eye them with suspicion. We *know* that they are cameras in these globes because we're able to watch the party move below us, in crystal clear detail, instead of from a corner as a fly on the wall like many of the other security cameras.

"The Jenny is wired like it's Prince's house," Madeline warns.

"Which Prince?" Boxer asks, not getting the reference.

"Ya know, the purple one," Madeline responds.

"As a UPU2, I'm unable to identify people by their color. We're more than that. When we say stuff like that, we're just joking," Boxer says earnestly.

"You sound like Vaughn is writing your lines," Madeline responds.

"You don't want to know who wrote my lines," Boxer says, under his breath, but the audio of his voice is crisp, despite the fact he isn't wearing a microphone. Maybe he really does have new "metal" cufflinks- a gift from Nana Mae to ensure she isn't embarrassed again.

The cautious couple makes their way through the nightclub, never making eye contact with the various men in tuxes that observe them from the booths and bar.

"What the fuck, Cyndi Pinziki is one of the guests," we say, pointing at the screen as the couple passes her.

*"They're shooting footage of Krysta's performance for the show. Cyndi's idea, so Cyndi gets a ticket."*

"Where did you hear that?"

*"Ash announced it in The Daily Variety."*

"But Vaughn must have looked over the guest list before he approved Bobby going up in the mega-zeppelin."

*"He sure did."*

"And he wasn't concerned?"

*"Apparently not."*

"This woman tasered him in the balls."

*"And when the mega-zeppelin lands, there's only one way off- directly into the hands of the UPU2 officers waiting to arrest her for a litany of charges."*

"Oh, shit. That's kind of genius."

*"Vaughn Smallhouse is not Bobby Frost."*

The feed switches away from Boxer and Madeline, then seems to do some searching in a circular pan across the cocktail hour. These cameras provide such a vivid image, that we notice, on the walls of the seating area, are pictures of prior zeppelin failures. Massive airborne structures plummet to the ground in photographs that look like they could have been screencapped from the worst of Boxer's filmography. We can't help but wonder why Baron would choose these pieces. We have to hope that it's merely to remind people that he took an idea that seemed terrible, then he turned it into LA's hottest nightclub and performing arts center in the sky.

It isn't until a cloud of smoke drifts through the frame that the feed finds its person of interest, and devotes its attention accordingly.

We watch as Serpentine walks through the party. Men in tuxes openly gawk at her, while she slides by them, dancing in such a fluid way that she

seems to be carried by the smoke. She passes Bobby Frost, who laughs with Vaughn, then she passes by Inga, who sits at the bar, holding up a champagne glass to cheers with a line of people who have queued to pay tribute to this matriarch of new-tech in America. Everyone she slinks by looks well-fed, and well-dressed, and wealthy. The exotic nature of Serpentine's appearance is enhanced by the pale complexion of the rest of the guests at this party. Boxer, with his Cali tan, is nine shades darker than everyone else here.

The feed cuts to a massive banquet hall inside The Jenny, as Serpentine drifts onto the stage that a sea of diners have a clear view of. She arrives next to Baron, who's giving a speech. She enchants the crowd by dancing around him, as he extols, "I would like to welcome everyone to the Jenny von Westphalen mega-zeppelin! This will be the Southland's premier tourist attraction, and best of all, the tourists will be in the sky, so we don't have to worry about our increasingly crowded cities and highways!"

Everyone applauds this idea because traffic sucks here and the more people we can stuff into the sky, the less will be down on the road.

"It is imperative to me that each and every one of you have the night of your life while you're my guests, so to assist in this goal, first we will have a four-course dinner, as The Gibson String Quartet plays for us on this very stage, then after that we have a surprise from one of LA's hottest stars."

Again, the audience applauds.

"So thank you, Southland, thank you California, and thank you, God," Baron declares, then turns around to plant a wet kiss on Serpentine, but she's nowhere to be found.

The feed hops back to the bar area, as Bobby and Vaughn's quietly converse directly under one of the security bulbs.

"Nana Mae should be here," we hear Vaughn grumble.

"Traffic was bad. She didn't arrive in time for liftoff," Bobby defends his wife.

"Do you really believe that? Tell me, honestly- do you genuinely believe that she even left the Caltrans building in the first place?"

"I'm going to go see if Madeline and Boxer have scored us a table," Bobby responds, evading this question, and the conversation, like the politician he is.

Vaughn turns to the bar, and lifts a finger to signal to the bow-tied female bartender that he'd like his scotch refreshed.

As the bartender pours him a fresh glass, Vaughn asks, "Got any cigars?" while holding up a twenty.

The girl in the bow-tie rolls her eyes at this mischievous request, and we see indications of a smile on the side of Vaughn's face. He places the twenty on the pure white bar, then picks up the drink.

Sliding into frame, taking the bar stool next to Vaughn, is none other than Cyndi Pinziki. She almost puts her lips to Vaughn's ear, as she asks, "How are the rocky mountain oysters hanging? Heard you had them cooked, medium well."

Vaughn doesn't react to this taunt in the least, and to flaunt his control of the situation, he says, "The moment your thumbprint was scanned at the door here, Nana Mae sent a text message to my phone."

"Yes, that sounds precisely like what I'm working to eliminate. You pork-fed fuckers won't be able to track us like that when I'm done dismantling your Orwellian nightmare."

Vaughn continues his revelations, "Nana Mae asked if I wanted you escorted off the zeppelin before it took off, but I told her to hold off."

"And why's that?" Cyndi asks, swirling a martini, almost flirting.

Vaughn turns to Cyndi, then says, "I told Nana that I wanted to look the queen bitch in the eyes one last time so I could tell her that all her worst fears about what we are doing are absolutely right."

"You're comfortable with admitting that to me?" Cyndi responds, visibly excited that, for once, her paranoia wasn't delusional.

"Yes. I'm comfortable admitting that to you."

"You know what I'll do with this information?" Cyndi continues.

"Yes," Vaughn confirms, nodding.

"And you're okay with that?"

"You would've found out one way or another, because we're going to haunt you," Vaughn says.

Cyndi stirs her martini, then sighs, "So my options are?"

"A bullet or incarceration," Vaughn says, and the banter of the conversation fades, as the hate rises to the top.

"You tell your gal pal, Nana Mae, that the clock is ticking and the queen has become a dragon that will be vanquished by the sword of our fair prince, Karl Marx," Cyndi counters with a vengeance.

"Do you know how many non-murderous Marxist empires this world has had?" Vaughn asks.

Cyndi gulps down half her martini and pretends she didn't hear the question.

"Correct. Zero. And that's how it will stay, for as long as the Earth is spinning, because while you animals eat each other alive over triviality, the Republicans will be watching from afar, viewing your death like sport," Vaughn says, then takes the martini glass out of Cyndi's hand. She initially tries to stop him, but then she understands what he's doing. She smiles because the proud Marxist can't be outraged that she has to share.

Vaughn takes his socialized drink, and makes his way through the party, checking his phone. One message- a message we can't see- makes him set down the martini glass, and immediately dash into the dining room.

Reaching Bobby's side, Vaughn leans forward and delivers some troubling news, "Sir, your wife is in danger, along with every USIDent employee currently on shift in the Caltrans building. We need her to issue an evacuation for all of the raincoats not only on her floor, but on all floors, and most importantly, she needs to relinquish her post immediately."

"That building is secure," Bobby says, drifting toward the Frost table when he sees one of the bow-tied servers carting out some steaks.

"The Neo-Marxist are, floor by floor, taking the building over," Vaughn reveals, and we have to wonder who informed him of this via text.

Bobby instantly becomes engaged, and he takes this report seriously, asking, "How the hell did they get through security?"

"With AR-15s. Shooting people. In the head and chest," Vaughn says, providing the information in escalating bits.

"Fucking cockroaches. Maybe they're so passionate about gun bans because anytime they're at one of their rallies, they look to their left and their right and realize *they're* the threat," Bobby says. Knowing something must be done, immediately, Bobby cups a hand over his mouth for a moment, but when Madeline looks up at him with a look of expectation, this causes him to reach down for his napkin, then take his seat at the table.

Vaughn doesn't sit down- instead, he crouches by Bobby's side, and demands, through his teeth, "Put on those damn glasses and get your wife out of that fucking building."

"She has cameras everywhere, she knows what's going on. She's organizing the protection of this entire city every day, so she can handle a single building," Bobby responds, and it's almost as though he knows Nana

Mae will never leave her post and the call will only lead to their potential last conversation being a fight.

"Your wife's life is in danger," Vaughn says, loud enough that both Boxer and Madeline look up from their food.

"We can't give in to terrorists," Bobby says, presidentially.

"But you *can* save the life of someone important to you, before the terrorists get them first, Daddy," Madeline says, joining Vaughn's concern, not unaware of what's been going on leading up to today.

"They're taking the bottom of the tower first, how will you get her out of there?" Boxer asks practically.

"How did you know that?" Vaughn asks, cutting a glance Boxer's way.

"My gi-" Boxer starts to say, but catches himself and fixes the statement to, "My gut feeling," instead of, "My girlfriend told me this would happen."

Madeline shoots him a look, then grabs his cell phone off the table.

"Really? What in our history tells you that going through my phone will be a good idea?" Boxer asks.

As Madeline places the phone back on the table, Bobby stands up, before the first course ever arrives.

"I'll call Teena. She'll get some troops diverted to the tower," Bobby says.

"Why hasn't she already?" Madeline asks, not mad, but instead intrigued.

"Because her men are fighting in the streets," Boxer provides the answer.

"What are they focusing on protecting?" Bobby asks.

"Themselves," Boxer responds, then he stands up, his posture rigid, and he motions for everyone in the conversation to join him at the perimeter edge of the dining room.

At the wall of windows that runs on a curved parallel with the stage, Boxer, Vaughn, and Bobby congregate to have a discussion, but as each man glances out at what should be a beautiful view, they put their hands up to cover their mouth, while they presumably watch a city they love burn.

Bobby stares out at the growing fires, then puts on his sunglasses and jawbone.

For a moment, in the reflection of his glasses, we see exactly what's occurring under the mega-zeppelin, and even from a great height, the damage is still clear.



When Nana Mae picks up, Bobby swings around, so he's looking out at the mega-zeppelin ballroom.

"Check... it out," Bobby says, in a bright voice, and we realize that the politician is using his dopey charm to manipulate and save the woman he loves.

He puts his head on a slow swivel, showing Nana Mae the party, while he hypes up the experience, saying, "Would you look at this? Amazing."

"That's great and all, but while you're up there partying, I'm holding this country together," Nana Mae says, with resentment, as though she didn't actively choose to skip the launch.

"That's not your responsibility, Nana Mae," Bobby makes it clear.

"Statements like that are precisely the reason why America is in such trouble," we hear her respond, "That mentality is a disease. It's no one's responsibility until the blood is on the asphalt, then everyone has an opinion on how things should've been handled."

"Honey, you need to get away from those screens," Bobby says, and we can't help but feel as though, in the slim chance that the mega-zeppelin safely lands, Bobby Frost is going to shut down USIDent, if not for the benefit of the American people, than to save the woman he loves. What good is it for a man to be able to watch the entire country, but no longer see the one woman he needs by his side?

"I don't need to leave these screens. I need more information on the screens. We're capturing valuable data on the Neo-Marxists," Nana Mae says, but Bobby keeps pushing the issue, scoffing, "They're a bunch of dorks whose parents didn't hug them enough- that's all the information we need. People will see them acting like animals and the pendulum will swing the other way," Bobby responds sensibly, drawing on history as a reference point.

"None of that will come to pass if they succeed in their plans," Nana Mae warns. "Do you recall my raid of the Neo-Marxist compound? It confirmed that they're trying to rig the election. California is too close to call and if we aren't careful, we'll have Neo-Marxists showing up with bags of thumbs, voting hundreds of times, then passing the digits off to their friends across state lines," Nana Mae says, once again bringing up her single success.

"Alright, sweetheart, I appreciate your dedication to this cause, but at some point, you need to draw the line. The Neo-Marxists have infiltrated

USIDent's headquarters. Portions of the Caltrans building are on fire. These are facts. I'm going to call Teena and-

"-do you think I'm unaware of what's occurring in my own building, you fucking yokel?" Nana Mae counters, and we're happy that we can't see how this hurts Bobby, but we know it does.

The feed switches back to the Frost's table, as Boxer sits back down next to Madeline. The orchestra is now playing, and everything is lit in an ominous blue lightning. As Boxer and Madeline listen to the music, a man in a black suit passes by the table, and asks, into a headset, "Are Krysta and the Memory Gospel Dancers dressed yet?"

Madeline, not letting this ambush happen, quickly turns to Boxer, who seems to be nodding his head to the string quartet, and she says, "I want to dance tonight. Will you dance with me?"

Boxer stops bobbing his head, and looks over at his pregnant wife, then says, "Time will tell."

"You can't even say yes to something that simple?" Madeline asks, her voice a whisper.

"No. I can't," Boxer admits, forcing himself to have conviction in his understanding of how tonight will go.

Madeline splays her hands out, palms down on the table, like she's bracing herself, then asks, "How did it come to this?"

"Suddenly," Boxer says, not even thinking about it.

"How does it end?" Madeline's mouth asks, but this is a question that her voice can't collude on.

Boxer pauses, then almost as though he's been given the answer, he says, "A handshake."

Madeline looks genuinely hurt, and she grabs onto Boxer's massive bicep, hissing, "We were- *no*- we *are*- so much more than that. *I* deserve more than that."

"That's how it has to end," Boxer informs her.

"I've done nothing wrong," Madeline says.

"I know," Boxer confirms.

Madeline clearly wanted Boxer to leverage an allegation against her so she'd be able to fight the charge, and clear her name. Instead, she can only ask, "What changed?"

"I did," Boxer states with absolute confidence, as he's not the man that fell in love with Madeline Frost.

Madeline nods at this, then whispers, "And that leaves me..."

"I don't want to leave you," Boxer assures her, in a voice that makes it clear that he's being pulled in two different directions. His actions these past couple of days have had varied and far-reaching impacts, some that he's not happy with.

"Then don't leave me," Madeline responds, as if it was this simple.

"I have to."

"Why?"

Boxer looks to the stage, and says, "Because I have The Power."

"And I'm the one person at this table who's powerless," Madeline says, as Secret Service agents watch her, not because she's important as a person, but because she's important as a pawn.

Boxer shakes his head, then reminds her, "Power now travels through the air... everyone has some power now."

The girl whose parents might control the country, if November ever arrives, bemoans, "Things were so much easier when the power was centralized."

"We need to go forward, never backward," Boxer says, like a politician shedding mistakes.

Madeline, desperate to salvage what she had, asks, "What happens when you go backward?"

Boxer exhales, "This."

The music ends, and Bobby returns to the table. We can see the pain on his face, and for the first time since we've started watching the Frost family, Madeline looks related to her father.

There's a commotion on stage as the quartet leaves and the sound guys make sure all the mic cables are pushed out of the way so one of the *NOW* girls doesn't face plant and pop an implant. Boxer watches them work, and Madeline leans toward him, whispering, "Last night, I had a dream that you died."

Boxer looks like he's about to tent his fingers, but as he turns to Madeline, he puts both his hands on the table, then pushes out his chair.

"Boxer, I didn't mean it in a sinister way," Madeline says, afraid of what she's done.

"Why did you call it a dream instead of a nightmare?" Boxer asks, then he leaves his wife, again.

"Hey! Get back here!" Madeline calls out, trying to make a scene, but everyone in the dining room seems to be in their own world, far away from the Santaros' marital strife.

The feed hops from camera-to-camera, as Boxer makes it to the far end of the party, where the creepy midget is standing, and in a rare moment, she doesn't have a von Westphalen in tow.

Making sure not to hunch down, despite his massive frame, Boxer humbly approaches the midget, and says, "I just want to thank you, so much..." then he pauses, trying to mentally locate her name.

"...Katarina," she says, then gives him a warm smile, like she knows that Boxer is on a collision course with pain, but she appreciates that he's taking the road less traveled.

"Katarina. That's a very pretty name," Boxer says.

"It has to be," Katarina responds.

Boxer squints, then asks, "Why?"

"My last name is Kuntzler," Katarina says.

Boxer makes a circle with his lips, as he exhales an, "Oof."

"There is something you need to see," Katarina says, and Boxer stares at her intently as she holds out a translucent security card, "Use this access badge. It will take you to the King James Suite."

"I'm tall, but I don't play basketball so I don't have much interest in checking out the court," Boxer says, since he probably presumes everyone seems like LeBron James to Katarina.

"There is no basketball court on this mega-zeppelin."

"Then what's in the James Suite?" Boxer asks.

"You," Katarina growls, then demands, "Now go!"

Boxer slices through the party, until he reaches the elevator, and after making sure that no one's tailing him, he puts the card he's been gifted into the reader.

The elevator doors open, and Boxer removes the card, then steps inside and takes a deep breath.

From the camera in the corner of the elevator, we watch as Boxer uses the card again so the elevator will accept his destination.

A screen in the upper right corner of the elevator seems to glitch out when Boxer inserts his card, but it quickly corrects itself, and displays the words, "Welcome, Dr. Katarina Kuntzler, to the Marx Club Suite," at the same time that a soothing voice states this information as well.

After pressing a button etched with the letters K.J.S. on it, Boxer waits patiently as the elevator rises, and we expect this to be a short trip, but it isn't. If anything, this shows just how massive the mega-zeppelin truly is.

A plucky bing announces that Boxer has reached his destination, and the sexy robot says, "Welcome, Dr. Katarina Kuntzler, to the King James Suite," then the elevator doors open.

"Mr. Santaros, welcome to the King James Suite," we hear as a booming greeting, and this voice isn't robotic- it sounds exactly like Simon Theory.

Boxer draws a gun from inside his jacket, and when he steps out of the elevator, a two-man standoff is revealed in the security camera of the King James Suite. Sitting in his motorized wheelchair is Simon theory, gun raised, as he yells, "Simon says lower your sidearm."

Boxer's gun remains raised, aimed at Simon's head.

"Are you just deaf or willfully stupid?" Simon yells, with a drill Sargent's tone, "I told you to lower that fucking sidearm!"

Boxer doesn't back down. He seems to trust his trigger finger. Someone already got a jump on Simon Theory once, and they left him unable to ever jump again.

"Shoot me, and it will be like putting a bullet in your own brain because I know a whole lot about you that you don't have the first inkling of!" Simon yells.

Boxer can't help but lower his sidearm because he knows a bunch of expository dialog is about to be monologued, and the action hero guild requires that he listens to it before any drastic measures are taken.

The moment that Boxer's gun is placed on the floor, Simon offers an amiable, "And there you go," then gestures, scooping the air behind him, "Well, come on in."

Boxer walks into a room that seems to overlook what originally we presumed to be a pool, but now it occurs to us that this is a Liquid Karma bath- a reservoir which ensures that even if Utopia 3 is destroyed tonight, the von Westphalens could oxidize the Liquid Karma in the mega-zeppelin to keep them afloat for days.

Without beating around the bush, Simon says, "I presume you're here to see yourself."

Boxer gives a half-cock of his head to wave this away, then he declares, "I'm here to save the world."

"Ya won't be doing that I'm afraid," Simon responds, "I mean, it would be great if you did and all, but you, sir, are too late, as am I."

Boxer's heroism isn't deterred, and he points out, "The Earth is still spinning, just slower."

Simon's beard frames a smile, and he says, "That is true. The Earth is getting slower, by, to be exact, point, zero, zero..."

Boxer picks it up, "...zero, zero, zero..."

"...zero, zero..." Simon continues the volley.

"...six..."

"...miles each day."

The men exchange appreciative glances that their science is the same.

Now at ease, Simon says, "Boxer Santaros, hot damn, I've wanted to meet you, but I felt real crummy about what happened out in the desert, so I couldn't bring myself to make an introduction until now. The dude who cost me my legs... I never want to see his face again... so I thought you'd feel the same way about me. Yet, here you are."

"Katarina led me here," Boxer reveals.

"She's our mole inside Treer's operation," Simon admits.

"And you work for?"

"I work for you, my good man. My job is with the US government," Simon informs Boxer, just in case the camo outfit didn't give it away.

"Let's rewind," Boxer requests, and Simon asks, "Again?" then chuckles like a military-style Santa.

"You said that you did something to me. Did you drop me out in the desert and erase my memory?" Boxer asks, pointing fingers.

"Yes... and no. Let's make sure we're both up to speed here, then I'm gonna show you something that's probably going to ruin your entire night," Simon says.

Boxer nods at this, so Simon covers all his bases, and asks, "If I tell you some wild shit, and show you some wild shit, will you try to shoot me? And notice I said *try*, because you'll never get away with it."

"My sidearm is at my feet- I'd like it to remain there, and I'd like to take it when I leave," Boxer responds.

"Absolutely, sir. I completely understand the need for it. When we land- *if* we land- we're gonna have a hell of a time gettin' off this big fucker. As it stands right now there are thousands- probably tens of thousands- of folks all up and down the street, spreading out into the surrounding arteries

coming in toward the downtown area,” Simon says, confirming our worst fears.

“Can you tell me what's happening?” Boxer requests, and it borders on pleading.

“This whole shebang is something I've come to call 'Serpentine Dream Theory,’” Simon reveals.

“I know Serpentine,” Boxer says.

Simon shakes his head, “No one truly knows Serpentine. She's the sexiest and vilest woman to ever walk this Earth, and I've assembled this conclusion based on a 10% total knowledge of her antics.”

“What's the backbone of your theory?” Boxer asks.

“Remember when the Tidal Generators achieved simulated perpetual motion, and everyone was like, 'Shit yeah, energy with no byproducts!' and whatnot?”

“You know I don't remember that, but I understand it,” Boxer responds.

“Right- again- apologies, but back to the problem we have here- as it would turn out, it seems that the impact of the Fluid Karma revolution is that it has slowed the acceleration of the planet to such a degree that certain environmental anomalies have started to surface. One of these anomalies- people acting batshit crazy- is something you've seen firsthand. Didn't a lady try to suck your cock in public today?”

“Yeah, but that's not totally abnormal,” Boxer responds.

“Rock 'n roll. If I had legs, I would try to become an action star,” Simon admits.

“We're on the top of the ass totem pole,” Boxer brags.

“So you have gals out there willing to suck your totem pole in broad daylight?”

“Of course, but usually they're better looking than that lady from today,” Boxer responds.

“Right on,” is Simon's only response.

There's a beat of silence, then Simon asks, “What was I talking about?”

“You brought up the lady at the beach for a reason. You were incorrectly stating that her cock-hunger was an anomaly.”

“Ah, right!” Simon says, his stoner-brain failing him for a moment, then he gets back on track, “You watched that woman get shot by Pilot's rifle. That murder occurred in broad daylight, just like that blowjob would have, and no one really freaked out.”

"People ran."

"Yeah, they went and got a smoothie, maybe blew each other in a handicapped stall like civilized people with decency do, then they went right back out on that beach," Simon says.

"What are the other discrepancies?" Boxer asks, like Jericho would.

Simon strokes his beard, then lays it out, "Another anomaly we discovered... was a rift in the fourth dimension."

"You put that in second place after cock-chugging?" Boxer questions.

"I mean, no one is getting blown over a rift in the fourth dimension," Simon accurately points out, then explains, "This rift in the fabric of space-time was half a kilometer wide, located on the outskirts of Lake Mead."

Boxer's pupils dilate, but he doesn't lift his hands.

"Yes, Mr. Santaros. It's just like you imagined in your screenplay," Simon confirms.

"Technically, I didn't write that screenplay, I just helped Krysta with some ideas, then slapped my name on it," Boxer reveals.

Simon shrugs, and says, "Meh, welcome to Hollywood. You're a writer now."

Fixed on the theory, Boxer asks, "So you found this rift..."

"...and, obviously, we launched monkeys into it," Simon says, like Boxer's entire question was, "So did you launch some monkeys into that shit, or what?"

Boxer raises an eyebrow, and asks, "You're... a scientist?"

"Not really. I had a lot of other scientists help me though."

"You did this with government money?" is Boxer's next question.

"You bet your dick I did."

"And the monkeys?" Boxer asks.

"We fucked them up. Bad. Only a human subject could survive that jaunt," Simon willingly divulges.

"The soul of a monkey can't survive a trip through the dimensional threshold," Boxer says, with misplaced confidence.

"How'd you know that?" Simon asks, impressed.

"The statement you made prior allowed me to presume."

Simon wags his pointer finger at Boxer, then says, "I knew there was a reason that they used you."

"Used me?"



"Absolutely. We decided that the first human subject to travel through the rift would be a movie star."

"Why me?" Boxer asks, and Simon quickly says, "I never mentioned your name there. How do you know I wasn't talking about Tom Cruise?"

"Oh, is that why he's acting all weird now?" Boxer asks.

"Nah, I'm just fuckin' with ya. It was you," Simon admits, then Boxer again questions, "Why me?"

"Your celebrity status and your political ties proved an irresistible combination. Imagine... you go through the rift, then come back with knowledge of the future, and you sway the election, then also get a really cushy daytime talk show where you tell people stuff about the future- shit like, 'Guess what, everyone, Beanie Babies will make a comeback,'" Simon says.

"But that didn't happen. It just made me dumb as fuck," Boxer says.

"I mean, ya weren't building rockets even before we sent ya in there," Simon notes.

"Alright, well, then it erased my memory," Boxer responds.

"Well, there was a bit of a snafu," Simon admits, then grimaces.

"Which was?"

"At approximately 10:51 AM, 69 minutes before you, Boxer Santaros, passed through the rift- you, Boxer Santaros, appeared in the desert," Simon says, all of this information burned into his brain.

"How?" is all Boxer can ask.

"You traveled 69 minutes back in time, sir, at which point your future-self..." Simon raises his left hand, "and your past-self," Simon raises his right hand, "simultaneously coexisted," he states, then unites his palms, and begins to tap the tips of his fingers together.

"So I'm my future-self, but where's my past-self?" Boxer asks, hands by his side.

"That's the thing that I told you about when I said something was gonna chill you to the core."

"Don't tell me that past me became a Neo-Marxist," Boxer responds in a near gasp.

"No. Hell no. It's not that bad," Simon says, but doesn't elaborate further.

"I can handle it," Boxer assures him.

"Then follow me, sir," Simon says, wheeling to a door at the far right of the frame. He slides a translucent card into a security slot, presses his thumb onto the card, then the door opens with a mechanical hiss. Turning back to Boxer, Simon says, "Inside, you will find you."

The feed clicks over to a circular room, and in the center of the room, is the high-tech rectangular box that Simon would set up his D&D games on.

Boxer, speechless, approaches the box. He places both hands on the glass, then he peers inside. Immediately, he pushes away from the box, and puts his face in his hands.

"That is all that's left of your past-self," Simon says, motoring over to Boxer's side.

Boxer's massive shoulders slump, and he seems like he's going to return to that fetal position we saw him in when we first climbed onto the roof.

"*That is Box-er Santaros,*" Simon jokes.

Boxer's hands drop to his side, then he says, "I know what this is. You're fucking with me. That's one of the body castings I did for a movie. That's not me. That... is not me."

"Oh, but it is. That body, that artifact, and your 69 minutes of dual-existence of a single human soul could unlock the secret of creation."

Boxer walks back to the box, and he really studies what he's being shown. Drumming his fingers atop the coffin's glass, he hits a snag, and says, "I don't understand. I've never considered committing suicide. I'm a pimp. And pimps don't commit suicide."

"You didn't commit suicide," Simon assures him.

"Then how did this happen?" Boxer asks, his voice airy.

"The moment you went through the rift, a rocket struck the SUV you were in. You had already entered the rift- in the front seat- but the rocket hit the back of the SUV, so the you that entered the rift went back in time, while the other you was incinerated inside the SUV."

"That's terrible," Boxer says, hanging his head.

Simon nods at this, strokes his beard, then offers, "On the upside, it confirms that you're still a pimp."

"I don't know much, but I always knew that," Boxer says, making a fist, then putting it over his heart.

"You want me to drop the top on this bad boy?" Simon asks, navigating to the high tech controls on the coffin.

"Why would I want that?" Boxer asks, a little horrified.

"We don't know what will happen if two identical human vessels were to come into immediate contact with one another."

"So you guys got me on this zeppelin just so I could touch myself?" Boxer asks.

"Well, when you say it like that, it just sounds weird," Simon responds.

"Who was hired to kidnap me? And who drove me through the time rift?" Boxer continues to fire off questions.

Simon smirks, then asks, "Ya haven't figured that out yet?"

"What, is, his, name?" Boxer asks, enunciating every word.

"Officer Roland Taverner," Simon reveals.

"You're confused. After the rift stuff, I did a ride along with him."

"Ya didn't," Simon responds.

"Oh... so what type of coffin did this Roland guy get?"

"He didn't need one," Simon responds.

"How'd he survive the blast?"

"Mostly by not being in the SUV that got hit by a rocket. Roland Taverner was essentially a sheepdog, and you were the sheep. He was racing alongside you, chasing your SUV, and he was supposed to knock you into the rift, but when he saw the rocket, he slammed on the brakes, and he watched your vehicle get blown up as you entered the rift, then the momentum forced him to follow right behind you."

"So which Taverner did I do a ride-along with?" Boxer asks, having located the name in his mind.

"The future Roland," Simon says, then adds, "He goes by Ronald Taverner."

"And the other, Roland, where's he?"

"We are still tracking him, but the Neo-Marxists took all his personal artifacts so we're having trouble pinpointing his exact location," Simon admits.

"You guys have this USIDent service and you can't find one dude?" Boxer taunts.

"We found you, motherfucker," Simon defends himself, a little pissed, and he says, "You're missing the point. In the case of the Taverners, two identical souls are walking the face of the Earth, coexisting in the same dominion of chaos."

"What will happen if they touch each other?" Boxer asks.

"Who?"

"The Taverners. What happens if the Taverners touch each other?"

"You mean in a Milton Twins type way?" Simon asks, not totally against the idea.

"It doesn't make me comfortable at all that you were doing science experiments and your frame of reference for twins is an incestuous porno duo," Boxer responds, well-educated in this field by Krysta.

"Heyyy, I'm really good at this. I'm the dungeon master," Simon says, vetting himself.

"You killed me."

"Technically we didn't," Simon clarifies, without further explanation.

"Then who did?"

Simon reverses his wheelchair out of the room, as he says, "I ain't gonna be the next one to end in one of those coffins."

Boxer turns to him, and responds, "Want to try answering my question like a grown up?"

"Listen, when you go back downstairs, take a look out of this blimp's window and you'll see what's going on out there. Look at those crazy fuckers and tell me that you don't believe that there's some sort of dark shadow organization staffing people with rocket launchers out there."

"It just seems incredibly unlikely," Boxer points out.

"After tonight, it won't," Simon says, and in this moment Boxer seems to no longer have a use for Simon Theory. He walks over to his gun and picks it up. Simon immediately draws his sidearm, and asks, "Where are you going?"

"To find the only scientist I trust. Dr. Muriel Fox."

"Don't you want to know how you could save her?" Simon asks, regaining the upper hand with this question.

Boxer, fighting responsibility, fighting being Jericho, says, "I can't save her."

"Oh, you might want to rethink that outlook," Simon suggests.

"I have. It's all I can think about."

"I ran through that whole spiel, and you still don't get it?" Simon asks.

Boxer places the gun inside of his suit jacket, then carefully asks, "Get what?"

"You're an action star that sold us the apocalypse over-and-over," Simon points out.

"And?"

"And we're ascending this blimp into the space-time rift. Think about what I showed you. Think about the coffin. Think about how you've gotten out of the rifts you've passed through."

Everything makes total sense now, and Boxer sighs, "I have to die to save the woman I love."

"Correct."

"But I'm a pimp..." he adds, like this is an out.

"No argument from me," Simon says, raising his hand, and his gun in surrender.

"...and pimps don't commit suicide."

"Like the ad says."

"Which means... how do I get out of this?" Boxer gets stuck.

"It means your one and only- your true love- needs to walk over to you, and she needs to press a gun to your heart, and she needs to pull the trigger."

"My true love?" Boxer mumbles.

"Your true love," Simon confirms.

"Singular?" Boxer asks, his heart fractured.

"Singular."

Boxer shakes his head, then says, "Neither of those girls is going to shoot me so it doesn't-"

"-she has to."

"And if she won't kill me?" Boxer asks.

"Then she's committing suicide."

"But she's a pimp," Boxer maintains.

"For Madeline, the Republican Party is her pimp; for Krysta, my information shows that a fella named 'Fortunio Balducci' is her pimp."

"Right, but she pimps energy drinks," Boxer says.

"Brave new world," Simon celebrates, without judgment, then he asks, "Are you going to rewrite the ending to this bitch, or what? Are you gonna save our asses?"

Boxer thinks about it, then shakes his head no, and points out, "You rolled onto a mega-zeppelin so I got bad news for you, Simon, no matter what, I think your ass is fucked."

"So be it. I'm adventurous," Simon says.

Boxer pauses, then asks, "To close the rift, I have to give this gun to the woman I wronged- the woman I love- then... what?"

Simon restates the final solution, "She needs to press the barrel of that gun to your chest and pull the trigger, sending a bullet into your heart, thus killing you to save us."

"If I can borrow your gun... after we land, I'll make sure you get to taste Krysta's drink," Boxer promises.

"Don't. Mind. If. I. Do," Simon responds excitedly, then holds out his gun.

"It's incredibly unwise to give me this gun," Boxer says, and both men still have their hands on the shiny silver weapon as this is acknowledged.

"Yeah, but I've seen a shitload of your flicks, and some guy always karate-chops the gun out of your hand, so it's better to be packing a second sidearm."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Boxer says, then he puts the second gun in his waistband.

Now, Boxer needs to go back down to that party, and he needs to ask his true love to put a bullet in his heart.

"Just because you aren't as much of you as you thought you were, doesn't mean you're less than," Simon tells Boxer.

His posture improving, his eyebrow arched, Boxer looks at Simon Theory, and says, "I forgive you."

"You don't have to," Simon tells him.

"Yes. I do," Boxer responds, then turns and walks to the elevator.

The feed switches over to Martin's dashcam in his SUV, and it pulls us away from the immersion of the doomsday scenario on The Jenny.

Ronald and Martin continue their drive toward The Staples Center, and if we're to meet them there, it's time for us to go.

We look to the window, and in the brief moment we observe our surroundings, the waves get louder, and higher.

Pilot drops his fork onto a clean plate.

"Thank you for dinner," we say, and Pilot nods to acknowledge this. After a moment of silence, we ask, "Do we leave now? The sun has set."

*"The mega-zeppelin has taken flight."*

"One Taverner is in Walter's ice cream truck."

*"One Taverner is in Martin's SUV."*

"And they need to shake hands, directly below the rift, to close it," we say, and this is our final theory.

*“And the only two people who know this are sitting in a tourist trap of a restaurant.”*

“So we’ll watch the footage until it shuts off, then we’ll find the Taverners?” we ask.

Pilot nods at this, then goes and gets us more warm Budweisers.

We know this is procrastination, but that happens to be our specialty, so we settle in and watch the screen, as Martin and Ronald seem to be stopped at a traffic light and we hear someone yell, “I am the black knight of Beverly Hills, and I will unleash my wrath upon this world. I will build a tower of fire and you will rejoice.”

“I don’t think this guy is from Beverly Hills,” Martin says, squinting.

“Go around him,” Ronald says.

“But the light is red,” Martin responds.

“It’s all one light now,” Ronald points out, and Martin checks his mirror, then steps on the gas, and swerves around what turns out to be a homeless man.

“If we hit traffic, do not bail on me,” Ronald demands, then looks at his palm as it shines a bright red glow, and he says, “He’s here. I can feel the pull.”

“Wait, I thought we were going to Mexico?” Martin asks, looking lost.

“Then why’d you ask me where we’re going?” Ronald counters.

“I mean, I was following your directions and we were headed toward The Staples Center, which doesn’t look like Mexico to me... unless there’s one of those pit bull breeder shows going on there,” Martin says.

“You get me to The Staples Center, then you’ll earn your freedom,” Ronald promises, and Martin nods at this idea like it’s a good song.

Pilot hands us another Bud, then sits down and continues watching the feed.

After throwing on his directional, Martin says, “Yo, dawg, I’m going to empty out my account and take everything I got. I think my dad deposited my allowance earlier this week,” then he pulls to the side of the road, we presume in front of a bank.

Ronald, more focused on his palm than on his driver, can only offer, “Neat,” as a response.

The feed stays on the dashcam as Martin exits the SUV, and we worry about him because this wigger isn’t built for actual street life, much less a destabilized apocalyptic LA.

When Martin arrives at the ATM, the feed switches to the security camera facing the machine. In the same sexy woman robot voice that Pilot's turret speaks in when it rotates, and The Jenny von Westphalen greets its guests with, we hear the ATM say, "Welcome to the Rove Credit Union. Please have your USIDent card ready in order to make your transaction."

Martin takes out his card from a ska punk checkered wallet, then inserts it into the ATM.

"Welcome, Martin Kefauver. Welcome, Martin Kefauver," the sexy robot voice repeats, then says, "Transaction denied. Please report to your closest US Army recruitment base to have your account unlocked."

Martin looks back toward the SUV, then yells, "Yo, dawg, it says... it says 'Transaction denied.' What... what do I do?"

The feed doesn't switch back to the dashcam so we can't hear Ronald's response.

Martin puts his hands on his do-rag, then suddenly Ronald steps into frame.

After a quick inspection of the machine, Ronald says to Martin, "This is fine."

"Nah, dawg. We need money for bribes," Martin points out.

Ronald nods at this, then flatly says, "We're going to take the ATM machine with us to Mexico."

Pilot cackles at this, and we watch as both Martin and Ronald disappear from the frame, then return with a massive, heavy duty chain. The tension on the chain gets more severe as they get closer to the ATM, and we presume that it's been hooked up to the trailer hitch of Martin's big bastard of an SUV. Ronald secures the clasp on the other end of the chain to a horizontal bar on the ATM.

Ronald tells his little wigger buddy, "While you didn't earn the money in your account, and you're a grown man with an allowance, that still doesn't mean the government can take your cash. They take our cash digitally, we take the cash back, physically. Now, come on, let's show this ATM a little Fourth of July freedom, because this is America, damn it."

Before they can return to the SUV, a businessman steps in front of them, holding out a gun, and he yells, "I want to suck your dick! Let me suck your dick... or I'll shoot myself!"

The businessman puts the gun to his head.



Martin looks horrified, and says, “Aw, shit, officer. Did you tell everyone that I’m bi?”

Ronald has no law enforcement training, but he easily disarms the businessman by simply reaching over and grabbing the gun, taking possession of it. The dick sucker looks bewildered. Ronald puts the gun in the waistband of his UPU2 uniform, then says, “I’m not going to give you your gun back because no matter how crazy it is out here, you need to go about romance the normal way and at least take a dude to a movie before you suck his dick.”

“I want my gun back,” the cock-chugger says.

“I’ll give it back to you if you use it responsibly, and you don’t treat it as a means to get strange dick in your mouth.”

The businessman looks at Ronald, then says, “But what should I use it for then?”

“Protect your family, make sure the government doesn’t tread on your freedoms, and occasionally you can post on a social network about how your rights are being infringed upon and false flag operations are being systematically undertaken by the government to take this gun away from you.”

“I understand,” the man says, then Ronald removes the gun from his waistband and hands it back to the businessman.

We could be mistaken, but we could swear that the cock-chugger smells the barrel of the gun after he gets it back. Armed once again, he puts gun in the waistband of his suit, which seems to concern Ronald, who tells the guy, “I might have set a bad example when handling your gun, so, uh, word of advice- don’t put your gun down the front of your pants, or you might shoot your dick off, then no one can suck it, at gunpoint or otherwise.”

The businessman takes note of this, nodding and smiling warmly, then he says, “Best wishes with pulling this ATM out of the wall, officer.”

“Thanks, dawg. Please don’t tell anyone I’m bi,” Martin requests, then he follows Ronald back to the SUV.

The feed switches to the dashcam, and Martin takes the wheel, then turns to Ronald, and asks, “How’d you know to say all that stupid bullshit?”

“I’ve listened to a lot of right-wing talk radio in my cruiser and most of it is about how it’s wrong for men to suck dick, and about how the government is trying to take your guns away,” Ronald says, then he sticks

his head out of the passenger window, and counts down, "Five, four, three, two, one..."

Martin guns the engine, the chain goes tight without an inch of slack, then the SUV bursts forward, only to have the tires spin, while the ATM stands its ground. Martin looks to Ronald, who gives him a nod, then a second attempt to gun the SUV proves successful, as the ATM separates from its concrete surroundings, then smashes to the ground and begins to excessively spark and leak money as it tails the SUV. Random people run into the street to catch the bills and if this payload loss continues, there isn't going to be any cash left in the ATM by the time Martin gets out of California.

The feed switches back to the Jenny von Westphalen, as Boxer stands tall before an ice sculpture of Karl Marx in the massive dining room. He touches a hand to the cool sculpture, and his finger seems to slice through it- like the heat that Boxer Santaros is emanating could behead this statue in a single swipe. After flicking the water off his fingertips, Boxer walks to the massive windowpane on the far wall. The way the camera is set, we can't see his expression, but beholding such catastrophe, one is inclined to conjure thoughts of a more innocent time- a time when life was worth living- a time when freedom rained down on the horizon of Malibu, and other beaches of inordinate whimsy. The denizens of the fallen city are left with only one undeniable fact in the deep sea of speculation and conjecture.

We will see if this single fact remains or if the apocalypse will leave nothing untouched.

Now that Boxer knows what has happened to him, he turns back to the crowd, and looks to the stage, seeking out the woman who marked his body, and put a war zone on his back. He quietly scans the banquet hall, and when he doesn't find his destiny, he makes his way toward the bar. Might as well tie one on if it all ends tonight. The feed camera-hops to follow Boxer, until he finds Serpentine at what might be the exact same place at the bar where Cyndi confronted Vaughn.

Boxer grabs Serpentine's skinny arm so hard that she'll absolutely have a bruise tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow, and he asks her, "What happens if Roland touches Ronald?"

Serpentine ignores him, despite Boxer's grip constricting around her.

"What happens, if Roland, touches Ronald?" Boxer asks deliberately.

"You better watch your back, Mistah Santaros," Serpentine says, then jerks her arm out of his grasp.

"What happens?" Boxer yells, and this gains him the attention of everyone at the bar. Immediately, two men in black suits arrive at Boxer's side, and Serpentine tells them, "Please escort Mistah Santaros back into da banquet hall. Krysta Now will be onstage any moment."

"Hey! I need an answer! Hey!" Boxer bellows out, thrashing free from the grip of the security guards. He grabs Serpentine again and waits for the truth. Serpentine leans in close to him, and her lips touch his ear, as she hisses, "You've been shown da path to end all suffering. You should choose it."

The security guards pull Boxer away, and muscle him back toward the Frost's table.

The feed switches to the banquet hall, and blue mood lighting bathes everything.

As Boxer is pushed down into his seat, Madeline sighs, "This is familiar-in suits dragging you back to me."

Boxer fixes his tie, turns to his wife, then promises, "It will never happen again."

Madeline closes her eyes for a very long time, and it appears she might be trying to will the rift in the space-time continuum to swallow the megazeppelin.

When that doesn't happen, Boxer puts his hand on Madeline's broad shoulder, and he tells her, "I apologize for leaving again."

"It's fine. At this point, I expect it," Madeline says, cold, distant, exhausted.

"You were right," Boxer admits, becoming cold as well. This seems to be what Madeline needs to hear, and she turns to him hopefully.

"Your dream..." Boxer specifies.

"It was a nightmare," Madeline responds, making the correction that Boxer had demanded.

"Whatever it was, I died in it," Boxer says, not looking at his wife.

"We'll be fine," Madeline says, like she's trying to convince herself of this.

"Reach under the table, and take what I give you," Boxer demands quietly, his eyes shifting around the room.

"Now we're talking," Madeline says, reaching under the tablecloth. Her eyes go wide, and her hand jumps away from Boxer when, instead of his cock, we presume she's presented with Simon's gun. "What the fuck are you doing, you psychopath?" Madeline hisses.

"I'm going to cause a scene, then I need you to shoot me in the heart," Boxer says.

"I have news for you, you asshole, you've already broken my heart... and I don't even have the energy to return the favor. I'm tired, Boxer. I'm fucking exhausted."

At this moment, the stage lights come on. A voice that might be a robot, or might be The Lakers' announcer, says, "Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the National Anthem. I give you... Rebekah Del Rio."

Suddenly, Boxer is standing next to Madeline, who's standing next to Bobby, who's standing next to Vaughn, and the group is silent, as a woman with huge tits sings the National Anthem... in Spanish.

"What the fuck is this?" Bobby asks, out of the corner of his mouth.

Vaughn, through gritted teeth, says, "Don't complain, just smile through it. I know this is fucked up, but keep in mind, we're floating above Mexico Part II, and we need the people who aren't horrified by this musical abortion in order to win the election."

"We have to evacuate," Boxer says quietly, to himself, acknowledging this.

"Hell no. We're not giving up this country," Madeline responds, as the rockets are declared to have a "rojo" glare.

"Then you need to do something for me," Boxer responds.

"Actually, you're right. Give me the gun. Next up is that cock-chugger dance team," Madeline responds, "Her doing this to me is emotional terrorism and the Frosts will not let the terrorists win."

"She's not your enemy," Boxer says.

"I've heard her music and I'm just happy she'll be made a fool of right now so I can get the fuck out of the tabloids," Madeline mumbles.

Rebekah finishes her anthem, and receives a confused smattering of applause from everyone, except Cyndi who proceeds to aggressively clap, and yells in her Midwest accent, "Confront your whiteness, you fucking crackers!"

The loudspeaker-voice returns, and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Krysta Now, Shoshana Cox, Sheena Gee, and Deena Storm. They are... The Memory Gospel Dancers."

The feed switches to a side-stage view, and we feel a small amount of disappointment because this isn't the ideal way to watch the girls' choreography, but on the plus side, we get to witness Boxer's reaction as the four girls come out on stage.

In a bizarre twist, each *NOW* girl is concealing their face behind a mask. These masks are on poles, and when the dancers fully emerge from the Tidal Generator inspired mood-fog, we realize that these are gas masks.

To a downtempo bummer of a song, the girls do a version of the synchronized dance they did at The Poop Deck, and they don't look hungover at all, which is really impressive considering how shitfaced they got at their last performance.

When Boxer stands up, leaving his table, Pilot does the same, grabbing his Bible, then walking to the window that faces the roaring ocean, which knocks on the pane, requesting violent entry into the restaurant.

*"Let's go."*

We point at the screen, "But... come on... they are about to break into 'Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime' at any moment!"

*"They aren't."*

"Does Boxer dance with her?"

*"Who? Krysta or Madeline?"*

We think about it for a moment, then say, "Ya, that's the question."

*"They both dance with him."*

"Then what happens?" we ask, in a tiny voice.

*"He tries to evacuate the blimp."*

This makes us laugh, and the statement alleviates the tension. We ask, "How does one evacuate a blimp?"

*"You have to commandeer it and land it, or hand out parachutes."*

"Does Boxer do that?"

*"No. Hell no."*

"And the bullet to heart thing?"

*"Okay. We can stay for that."*

"What the fuck! Madeline does it?"

Pilot is distracted by the windows, and we can see his concern. To keep it together, we focus on the screen again. We see that Boxer has finished

dancing and now he's yelling, "Evacuate the atrium. Move to the rear of the mega-zeppelin."

Baron, from somewhere above the panic, calls out, "No! Everybody, go back to your seats!" and we want Pilot to take Baron's advice.

"Either you begin evacuating..." Boxer says, scanning the crowd, taking off his suit coat, "Or... I'll shoot myself!" he declares, tossing his jacket away, then he holds his gun to his temple, "...and I swear to God... I'll do it," he promises.

"Put down the gun!" Madeline yells, but Krysta is expressionless.

"This is all in my head. I can pull the trigger now and wake up. This whole nightmare will be over," we hear Boxer say to himself, and this is just absolute bullshit. We know he's wrong. Boxer Santaros will not be resurrected. When he dies, he will never return. Serpentine even told him; the baby is the chosen one, not Boxer.

Baron, with his mother by his side, rushes into frame, and screams out, "Don't listen to this fool. If we land this mega-zeppelin- if we evacuate- you'll be evacuating into chaos. This zeppelin isn't part of an evil scheme, this is an ark, and I am Noah! I have chosen you, two by two, to be saved. As you walked through the party, you might have noticed that another person has the same job as you, and that is because I've invited two of each of the most important positions in American society, and I have filled this zeppelin with enough food, enough drink, and adequate facilities, so that we can float in the sky as the land below us is cleansed!"

"Or until they shoot us down!" someone yells.

"They would never shoot down a mega-zeppelin with one of the leaders of the Republican party on it," Vaughn declares.

"You can't predict what they'll do down there," Boxer reminds the crowd, gun to his head.

"And yet you want us to land the Jenny von Westphalen? Their mission is to destroy Capitalism, and dethrone God. My mission is to give you *more*, make your life better, and reduce your dependency on other countries," Baron declares, then the crowd applauds. This stump speech is even working on Bobby and Vaughn.

"So here we are, the cream of the crop, and below us, we will allow the sick and the violent- the disgusting and the poor- to kill themselves and each other. All of you, up here, have a purpose, and those below us do not," Baron states.

"I'm a pimp. And there's no room left in the world for pimps," Boxer says, then he lowers his gun from his head, and puts it to his chest.

Madeline is frozen in terror, while Krysta rushes to Boxer, then wraps her arms around him.

"I love you, Muriel Fox. You stole my heart, so do with it what you will," Boxer whispers into her brunette hair.

"I'll protect it forever," we hear Krysta whisper back.

"The only way we can find forever is in heaven," Boxer says, as the Secret Service begins to close in on them.

"I watched Muriel fall to Earth, as the dragon broke through the clouds," Krysta says, then she slides her left arm between her fake tits and Boxer's chest. Even though we can't see it, we know she's wrapped her finger around the trigger of the gun. "I can't have you in this world, so I'll find you in the next," Krysta says to Boxer. This time, the beautiful damsel in distress can't be saved by the hero, so she fires the gun, sending a bullet directly into the hero's heart.

"No!" we yell, and Pilot doesn't even look back to the screen.

We watch as Boxer falls flat on stage, face down, while the Secret Service agents grab Krysta and karate chop the gun out of her hand.

We recall that it's an explosion that kills Dr. Muriel Fox in *The Power*, so she won't be shot by the Secret Service for what she did to Boxer.

The camera angle shifts to an overhead view of the banquet hall, and slowly, yet very clearly, an image of Jesus Christ bleeds from Boxer's tattooed back, through his dress shirt.

We hear Serpentine declare, "Da war is over. Da victorious religion has been revealed," and this definitive statement, as well as the proof on Boxer's back, sends the mega-zeppelin passengers to their knees to pray for salvation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the party's over. Have a nice apocalypse," the voice over the loudspeaker says, and in this moment, a tidal wave hits the side of the Mariasol so hard, it shatters the windows, and Pilot rushes toward us to escape the rushing water.

Stopping at the table, he grabs our face, and wipes the wetness from our cheeks, and we stare at his scar, all the makeup washed away, and we realize that Pilot cannot leave the past- he needs to save his best friend. We'll join him on this mission, because we know that when your best friend reaches out, and is there for you, it can mean the world.

Pilot lets us go, then grabs his Bible, unwilling to leave it, and we realize that Boxer Santaros wasn't a savior, but instead a martyr, and Krysta was The Primer, so we can't help but feel as though they did achieve the goals of *The Power*, as this is the only way they could possibly have each other.

We grab the laptop, then slog through the water that continues to splash into and across the restaurant. Pilot kicks the door open, and he doesn't wait for us- he quickly exits the Mariasol for the last time. This unbroken departure is either evidence that he feels confident that we can keep up, or he wants to give us a chance to bail- to sit on a table, and wait for an infinite storm to blow over.

We don't quit on Pilot, we rush out of the Mariasol, and we're immediately struck by a wave of seawater. We grab the railing, then strangle it as we make our way down the stairs.

When Pilot sees us stepping down onto the pier, he smiles.

*"We need to get to the Firebird! We can listen to the radio for updates! I'll turn up my walkie-talkie frequency to hear what the UPU2s are doing!"*

With our orders, we stand behind Pilot, and he fixes his walkie-talkie, then begins to make his way down the pier, toward the beach. He makes it only five steps before he's struck by a wave, knocking him on his ass, and we watch his Bible slide across the pier, heading toward the edge. This would have omen-like implications if this book of answers washes out to sea so we rush forward to save it. We reach the edge of the pier, just as the Bible goes over, and part of us wants to dive in after it, but a self-preservation instinct keeps us from doing that, and in a slow-motion moment, we attempt to stop our momentum- to keep our footing- to stay on the pier by wildly swinging our arms for counterbalance. We don't understand how this could cause déjà vu, but it does. We're saved, as Pilot grabs our hand, then pulls us forward. The familiarity of this circumstance clicks into place as we remember Roland Taverner escaping the compound, then balancing on the edge of the building, above the dumpster. No one reached out to save Roland in the past, and now we have proof we're with a man who performs this heroic act on pure-instinct.

There's no time to thank Pilot, so we start running him. Together, hand-in-hand, we save each other. We remember the story that Boxer told about a young Inga saving him on this very pier in the 20's, and it has repeated, proving that selflessness is unsafe, yet essential.



We must reach out, or watch those we love plummet.

Waves are routinely eating the entire length of the pier, submerging it for stretches of time, so our path to safety is navigated in uneven strides. Almost as though this perpetual motion machine was bound by predictable patterns, Pilot does a full field study of the crashing complexity before us, and we follow his lead.

A wave splashes twenty feet in front of us, and out of instinct, we slow our pace, but Pilot pulls us forward, sensing that we have to continue moving. He's better calibrated for split-second decisions, and we believe in him. We're in a terrifying position, with someone we trust, which is a better position than many Americans are in right now.

The water washes off the pier, and we feel the rush at our back as the ocean reaches for our heels. If we were running a fraction of a second slower, we would've been pulled out to the Tidal Generator- but we weren't, because Pilot made sure of it.

The closer the receding beach becomes, the more fun Pilot seems to be having- we catch the edge of his smile as he looks back to ensure we're safe. We understand that for every potential threat that's in Pilot Abilene's rearview mirror, there's additional contentment padding his soul. It's almost like he's looking evil in the face, and despite the surface imperfections, he can declare with complete pride, *This is one Abilene you fuckers can't destroy.*

We arrive where pier-meets-land, but things prove no safer here. There are knocked out tourists on the ground, which the ocean either buries or claims, and it's not lost on us that we easily could've been one of these people if we never took that jump toward an illogical action and looked down a lethal barrel because we felt we had to. It's with this same mentality that we rush toward the lot, so we can head downtown.

We are able to reach Pilot's Firebird by watching our friend's back, and assessing the scene before us.

Once inside the classic car- a piece of American history- we exhale, then begin drying off the laptop. What we will see tonight will be from our own eyes, but we felt it necessary to save the third wheel in our partnership with Pilot.

Pilot drums his palms on the steering wheel, then takes out his keys and pops them in the ignition.

We navigate around haphazardly parked cars in the lot, then out onto the street, where Pilot weaves the Firebird through gaps in the wreckage at a speed that doesn't allow for much error.

We don't ask where we're going- We watched Roland drive there/ We watched Ronald and Martin drive there/ We watched the mega-zeppelin rise above there/ We watched the space-time rift open and expand there.

This is how our 4<sup>th</sup> of July ends, not with passive observation, but with swift and decisive action.

As we see California like we never have before, we ask, "You know how people always say, 'If there's a kind and loving God, how come he lets war and famine happen all over the world?' and believers have to contest with this question?"

Pilot nods.

"This is the perfect example of what happens when we dethrone God. How does he let all that evil happen? Simple- he has two choices- let us do the evil, or raise the ocean and show us his wrath."

Pilot leans his head to the left, then to the right.

*"Are you supporting Inga's theory? That the Serpent Trench is from hell?"*

"The Serpent Trench is hell and we're pumping it into our atmosphere," we respond.

*"The Fluid Karma opened the rift, and given no choice, God sent Ronald Taverner to Earth so that when he touches Roland Taverner, it creates a paradox..."*

"...a paradox that seals the time rift, and stops the apocalypse. If a touch can pull Boxer out of the rift, there's that lingering question of what happens if two exact duplicates were to touch while directly under the rift? Could it create a sonic boom strong enough to decimate anything in its path? Seems like a damn good way to close a rift, which means, our kind and loving God will finally answer that question with a bang. This time, He will actively end the suffering, because we weren't capable of doing it alone."

*"And when the rift is closed, the same people will ask how God could let a rift open that destabilizes lives, and creates victims."*

"California gets to dodge accountability, deny wrongdoing, correct nothing, and blame God. As always."

Pilot is silent. His radio squawks military jargon. He grabs it off his belt, as though he's going to respond, then he glances over at us.

*"So we just need to make sure that the Taverners touch?"*

"If you need to touch someone to pull them out of the rift, how did Boxer's duplicate get out of the rift after going through it?"

*"No one touched him, that's why he arrived with an erased mind. You only retain your memories if someone pulls you out of the rift. If you stay in the rift, then the universe has to erase what you've seen so you don't use this information to manipulate the future."*

"So Boxer's duplicate, Ronald, and Roland, all had their memories wiped because no one pulled them out of the rift, but Boxer was able to recount what he saw in the 20's because Krysta pulled him out?"

*"Roland's memory wasn't wiped because he wasn't a duplicate. He's the same guy I sat up in that bird's nest with."*

"Regardless, the rift in the desert was closed by an action star who makes movies about Americans fighting in the desert, and he paid the karmic debt in that SUV."

*"As he was blown up in the same type of vicious and visually glorious way that he showed us so many times prior."*

"Boxer Santaros was sent into the rift because he was the only person who could pay for the violent propaganda he portrayed, while making millions. He's the personification of the military-industrial complex, and he never expressed shame over this."

Outside the Firebird, the catastrophe gets louder; inside the Firebird, it's reflectively quiet.

*"I created propaganda for the US Army. He quoted my ad on that zeppelin."*

"Pilot, fucking stop it," we spit.

*"Oh, now you're going to hop off the logic train?"*

"That ad is the truth."

*"Boxer Santaros put a gun to his heart."*

"But Krysta pulled the trigger, because for him to stay alive would have been murder *and* suicide."

*“So if he fixed things, why is that rift still high in the sky and growing?”*

“Because we need to get the Taverners to touch,” we say, sure of this fact, “Now, turn up your radio,” we demand, then we turn on the FM radio in the Firebird.

We run two audio feeds at the exact same time, trying to get as much information as possible because the laptop is too waterlogged to boot.

From Pilot's radio, we listen to a scratchy feed of police codes being yelled and locations being rattled off, and on the Firebird's radio, a host of a call-in news show says, “We'll bring you downtown to- we have- uh- they're telling me... here's some live audio of...”

“We've got a second perimeter breach at the Caltrans Building! I repeat, the reinforced perimeter has been breached again!” a man screams over Pilot's radio. “Fuck you. You fucking pigs!” blares, then the man who reported the breach isn't heard again.

“Uh-oh, wait. Apparently, we've lost contact with SkyCam,” the radio host says, then buys time, “As you could hear just before we lost the feed, there's a lot of people downtown, a lot of activity, all kinds of problems. I've been instructed to issue a message to the general public to please stay indoors. Stay inside.”

“They say stay inside,” we mindlessly repeat to Pilot.

*“We do that... and the world ends.”*

The Firebird growls, burning precious fuel, as Pilot swerves out of the way of marauding bums, newspaper boxes on fire, and abandoned vehicles.

“...and it's a problem right now because it looks like the crowds are growing,” the radio host says, “Even though we no longer have contact with our chopper, we do understand it was a group of right-wing extremists who started these riots as Neo-Marxists peacefully fought for the freedoms of all. They're continuing to move throughout downtown Los Angeles, meanwhile, the carnage is stretching countrywide. Throughout the Midwest, in nearly every state, and every county, there's a severe weather warning regarding tornadoes. The following towns no longer exist- Normal, Illinois; Joplin, Missouri; and Springfield, Nebraska.”

Pilot shakes his head.

*“We tried to be more connected and became unreachable.”*

"We tried to be more connected and became unreachable," a voice on the radio echoes.

"We're listening to a news station that isn't even attempting banter or bothering to explicate what's going on. It's just a laundry list of problems and pain," we point out.

"Reports of a mystery virus sweeping London are now coming in. Previous reports of multiple water plants being contaminated have been deemed to be incorrect, and the source of the virus is being investigated."

"London," we say, as the expanse of damage becomes unfathomable. It was supposed to only be America that was impacted. It was supposed to be our self-centered thinking that brought the reckoning upon us.

"The Treer Tower 1 fireworks display is currently going off, but do not let this confuse you, dear listener. The sounds you hear outside your window are that of gunfire... or exploding Karma relay points, due to the extreme heat. It is currently 132' in the Coachella Valley. Triple-digit temperatures in the Central Valley sustain even after sundown. Palmdale residents are enduring temperatures as high as 124 degrees," the Firebird's radio crackles.

"We need all fire units to Treer Tower 1. Repeat, all fire units," Pilot's radio crackles.

The FM radio host, who must also be listening to this channel, says, "We've received information that Treer Tower 1 is now a tower of fire. If you or your loved ones are currently in Treer Tower 1 please evacuate. We have Devon in the field reporting on the fire. Devon, are you there?"

After a moment of silence, we hear a man yell, "What in God's name are you talking about?"

Another man yells, "There he is. Let's go!"

A radio squawks, then we hear a man yell, "We've got automatic weapon fire at Fourth Street and Hill!"

"I think they're already inside," the reporter states, his newscaster voice wavering.

"Recommend opening fire into the crowd," we hear after another radio squawk.

"No!" someone screams.

"Run!" someone screams.

An explosion seems to blow out every speaker in the car, then a series of alarms sing in symphony around us.

This is the way the world ends, not with a big bang, but with thousands of smaller explosions, each with their own specific blast radius of devastation.

Pilot reaches forward and clicks away from the news, to the next radio station, just as Fortunio did in the first car ride we watched aside Pilot.

Instead of the panicked screams of the world, we end up on a song.

Music, in this moment, feels therapeutic. We hear a girl, and her piano. Despite the damaged speakers, we can make out enough of the song to be transported to another time. We recognize these lyrics. We've heard them before. Our past comes rushing back- a day in church, when we felt The Spirit- the song's name is "In Christ Alone."

Pilot stops at a red light, because the rest of the world refuses to, and we listen to the girl sing, as she plays her piano, and for once, nothing else needs to be figured out. There's a good chance that one- or both of us- will not survive the night, much less the next hour.

The light turns green, and Pilot still doesn't drive, he turns to us, his scar glowing green from the reflection of the light.

*"You changed my life... among others."*

We turn to look out the windshield, and ask, "Whose life did we change besides yours?"

*"Theirs."*

Pilot points to a dad who's kneeling, wiping tears off his teenage daughter's face.

*"Theirs."*

Pilot points to a UPU2, sitting on the ground, comforting a black woman who has blood spattered across her forehead.

*"Theirs."*

Pilot points to a group of teenagers with skateboards who are seeing the anarchy signs on their shirts and boards come alive.

We turn back to Pilot, but he doesn't point at himself, so we say, "Thank you for the most memorable vacation imaginable. Even if we get pulled up into the rift, and never get pulled out, this trip will always be unforgettable."

Pilot nods in agreement at this, then guns the Firebird, and we cut through LA, because there is still work to be done.

A weight in the air that hangs like Tidal Generator fog. It shouldn't feel different- this ride- because for nearly a week, we sat next to each other,

just like we are right now. We try to remember those moments, instead of looking out the windshield, watching it like a screen.

With his left hand on the wheel, Pilot lifts his right hand, and touches the scar on his face, as the girl continues to sing.

*"This might just be the Tidal Generator destabilization talking... but I think we're going to do it. Thank you for climbing up on that roof."*

At the next light, again we stop, and our heart hops when we see a giant ice cream cone on the street to our right.

"Pilot! There's the ice cream truck," we point out.

*"And there's Martin's SUV."*

Pilot points to our left.

Faced with two stretches of road, Pilot has to make a choice on which way he turns, and who he pursues.

"What do we do?" we ask.

His eyes fixed on nothing, like he's bleeding, Pilot makes his decision.

*"The exact moment that the two cars pass each other in opposite lanes, I'm going to drive into their path."*

"That's going to kill us."

*"No. That is."*

Pilot points up to the swirling, universe-in-its-core, space-time rift.

*"I'm going to crash the Firebird."*

"Pilot."

*"Get out."*

"No."

*"Get out in the next two seconds or you're going with me."*

In an adrenaline-surged panic, we get out of the Firebird, and we see that Martin's SUV, despite the strain from pulling the ATM, is moving at the same speed as the ice cream truck.

We lean toward the window, and quickly yell, "Pilot! You can't drive into this. It's like—"

*"—a war zone."*

Our head on a swivel as we judge the distance of both vehicles, we only have a moment to yell into the open passenger window the one thing we hope will keep Pilot from doing what we think he's going to do, "This car is something to remember your dad by."

That scarred face looks over at us.

*"He left me this car, for this reason. I can't wait to see him again."*

Pilot hits the gas and barrels into the intersection, but his timing is a little too early, so he slams on the brakes and comes to a screeching halt that lasts no more than a millisecond before Martin's SUV strikes the back of the Firebird, spinning it in such a way that when the ice cream truck slams into the front of the Firebird, the right side of the truck goes airborne.

With the top-heavy truck off balance, gravity takes effect and topples the truck onto its side, then momentum joins the party, continuing to push the vehicle through another intersection. This series of impacts knocks the wind out of us, even though we're untouched physically.

Martin's SUV benefited not only because of its boxy exterior, but also from the added momentum of the ATM pushing it forward, and if it wasn't for the hood buckling into the engine, Martin and Ronald would have been able to continue on through the intersection, away from Roland. With the SUV's crumpled hood obstructing the view out of the windshield, they're forced to exit the vehicle. Martin is given the gun he was going to kill himself with, and Ronald has his UPU9.

Pilot is right. This is like a war zone.

Ronald raises the 9 and aims it at the ice cream truck, because he can see that the truck, on its side, is filled with weapons and he must assume it's a UPU3 undercover vehicle set to take him out for impersonating an officer.

Both Martin and Ronald begin firing at the first sign of movement within the ice cream truck, and before Roland can even raise his hands in peace, he catches a bullet in the right eye and falls out of view, into the truck.

We look to Ronald, and we have to wonder if he's aware of who he just shot at.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Ronald needed to shake hands with Roland.

We begin sprinting to the ice cream truck, hoping Roland's soul hasn't left his body yet.

The Firebird is in our path, which means we can check on Pilot.



As we get closer to the twisted vehicle, we see that the ice cream truck hit the Firebird in such a way that Pilot received some of the impact, and it was simply too much for him to withstand.

We let out three desperate gasps, as our best friend in LA, Pilot Abilene, lies against the steering wheel of his car, dead.

This is how a friendship ends, first with a threatened bang, then with a silent whimper.

Pilot Abilene survived his mother's tragic passing, and he survived having his hometown being wiped off the map, and he survived his show getting canceled, and he survived going to war... it was only after he returned to America- a country that he lost everything for- that he was killed. Once again, Abilene has changed the world, but this Abilene is not a tragedy. This Abilene was a great man, who risked everything he was given so that his fellow-man could remain safe. This Abilene drove into the intersection and waited to get hit, but he did not commit suicide, because Pilot Abilene was a pimp, and...

**Pimps.**

**Don't.**

**Commit.**

**Suicide.**

We have to turn away from our friend's scarred face- a face slathered in fresh blood, and when we do, we're facing a wide-eyed Ronald Taverner.

"I can help you. Both of you. Come on," we say to Ronald and Martin, and that's when Martin turns the gun on us.

"Why the fuck did he stop us, dawg?" Martin asks, "I know that Pilot is working with the military. I'm not gonna let them take-"

"-that truck is full of guns," we interrupt Martin, "If we get inside it, you'll have an arsenal. We're going to defend this city. We're going to stop the apocalypse, and if we don't, at least we'll go out with a bang, and not a whimper!"

Neither Martin nor Ronald have time to argue or question this statement because automatic weapon fire chatters out around us like pages being flipped in a book.

We sprint toward the ice cream truck- to save ourselves- and once we find cover, then we can think about saving the world.

We crouch as we get closer to the truck, and we glance inside Walter's weapon-wagon to make sure we won't be shot when we step inside.

We see Roland Taverner, his glowing blue palm holding his face, as he kicks his legs in pain. This desperate panic is a relief, and a terror. Roland is still moving, which is good enough for us, so we rush into the truck, with Martin and Ronald close behind, then we slam the door once we're all inside.

We look to Martin, because we can't bear to see how Ronald will react when he lays eyes on the mutilated version of himself that he believes to be his brother.

"If they wanna send me to war, I'm gonna bring the war to them. Give me the biggest fuckin' thing you got, dawg," Martin says to us, reviewing the weapons that have jostled free and now sit in piles at our feet.

We know what must be done, so we grab the heat-seeking ground-to-air rocket launcher off the floor- which is actually the right side of the truck, pressed against the ground.

"That's what the fuck I'm talkin' bout," Martin says, as he takes the rocket launcher from us.

"You know what to do," we tell him, because we don't know if he should fire it up at the mega-zeppelin, or at Treer Tower 1, or at the Caltrans building. We have to hope that Martin senses his true target. We know for a fact that he shouldn't use the rocket launcher to destroy the Tidal Generator because the Liquid Karma would spill into the ocean, and the Pacific would become a drug.

Martin looks us in the eyes, and admits, like the child he is, "I don't know, dawg. That's the thing- I *don't know* what to do."

"Climb up onto the truck, and you'll know," we respond, and Martin looks down at the pool of blood from Roland's injury, then says, "Everything is so broken." Aside from when he placed a gun to his temple, and when he confided in Ronald about his fear of war, this is the most genuine moment we've seen Martin conjure.

"Fix it then," we tell him, and before we can even put a hand on his shoulder, Martin pushes open the door, and once it's clear, he leaves the truck.

We can hear him climbing onto the once-side, now-roof, of the ice cream truck, and as we follow the sound of his footsteps, we lock eyes with Ronald Taverner.

“Friendly fire,” Ronald gasps, almost in disbelief. His eyes are wide, and to get him to focus, we reach out and take his red glowing palm, then say, “You didn’t do that.”

“I did it. Friendly fire,” Ronald says.

“You didn’t do that,” we tell him again, and his hand glows brighter.

“I did it. Friendly fire,” Ronald gasps, then pulls away from us, and puts his face in his glowing red palm, then lets out two completely silent sobs. We don’t hear him cry, but his skin pulls tight, and his eyes blink out tears between his fingers.

“No, Ronald. Listen! Hey! Listen!” we yell at him. “Use your fucking memory for a moment- what little you have. Your UPU9 was filled with blanks. Remember? You shot it in the compound.”

“Friendly fire,” Ronald says, jerking away from us again, putting his back to the ice cream truck, then sliding down into a pile of guns. The moment he sits, we feel the ice cream truck shift. The sensation that follows is so bizarre that it can only be equated to an elevator going up. We look out the open door, and it appears as though the truck is being hoisted by a crane.

We’re being lifted toward the rift.

The ice cream truck hovers above LA, turning clockwise in its ascension.

The surprise we should feel in this moment isn’t as striking as it should be, because we could anticipate this occurring. We saw that UPU2 cruiser levitate when Ronald’s hand began to glow, so this ascension was foretold. Muriel and Boxer traveled into the sky in that Mooby’s restaurant, so this ascension was foretold.

Everything is finding its place, and when the truck gets to the right height in the sky- close enough to the rift- we’ll need the Taverners to touch.

This is something we were drafted for; we couldn’t ever imagine this would happen to us. It’s been the most emotionally complicated trip we’ve ever taken, but that’s not the case for Private Roland Taverner of the United States Army.

Roland Taverner’s world collapsed on a blisteringly hot day in Fallujah, and since then, he’s been walking around as though he was a ghost.

“Friendly fire,” Ronald says, staring at Roland.

With blood between his fingers, Roland's hand glows blue, and this glow becomes a shine, which becomes a beam of light. It appears to cauterize his wound, and once the blood no longer flows between his fingers, Roland removes his hand from his face, then looks over at Ronald with his one good eye, and he declares, "It's not your fault."

"Friendly fire," Ronald says, then he raises his UPU9 to his head.

"It's not your fault," Roland says again, his glowing blue fingers extending out. "Take my hand," Roland says, and we watch as, one by one, Ronald's fingers let go of the UPU9.

The gun clatters down beside him, no longer a threat. The only lethal shot that UPU9 is capable of is when someone has it pressed to their temple and pulls the trigger. It's a gun that can only be used to kill if someone is committing suicide, or intimately close to their victim. Those blanks that Zora bought will go unused. Thank God.

For a moment, it's totally silent both within and outside the ice cream truck, and this moment seems to stretch, until a slicing whoosh above us implodes the calm. We raise our eyes to the roof of the truck, and we have no view of where Martin shot the rocket. What we do know is that he has committed to destroying something in an act of terrorism. Like most acts of terrorism, this destruction is being carried out by someone who believes they're doing the world a favor.

The whoosh gets quieter, then ends with a cracking, sustained bang.

We look to Ronald, who looks to the open doors, and as the truck rotates, we finally get a view of The Jenny von Westphalen, as it burns and breaks apart, vomiting flaming bodies onto the streets below.

Roland demands, "Take my hand; I forgive you."

Ronald extends out his glowing red palm, but instead of completing the handshake, he touches Roland's wounded eye. The red of Roland's dried blood and the red glow from Ronald's hand meld together.

Our vision blurs, and for a moment there is only the red glow.

Everyone aboard the Jenny von Westphalen is now dead.

"Open your eyes," Ronald says, removing his hand from Roland's face.

Ronald does as he's told, and his wound is completely healed... except for a scar in the shape of a question mark.

"It's not our fault. He forgives us," the Taverners say, together, at peace, then they lock hands, and instead of a red light, or a blue light, a white light fills the truck and never rescinds.

We're killed by Roland Taverner, but we forgive him, because he saved the Earth, with us.



NULLA-

## GOODBYE.

*"I watched everything. I saw it unfold, and I want to tell you how proud of you I am. I could hear everything you were thinking, and just in case you don't remember, the last thought that went through your mind before that brilliant jubilee burnt off your skin was the assured belief that your reconnection of two separate beings that shared a soul was enough to seal the space-time rift in the sky.*

*And you were right... it was enough.*

*Dualities made whole, holes filled, a karmic debt paid in full; a fractured person martyrs himself for a fractured people.*

*His name was officer Roland Taverner of Hermosa Beach, California... and he was my best friend.*

*You never told me your name, but it wasn't about you, or about me, it was about us, saving the world, together.*

*For those days that you joined me on that turret, you became my world. I would watch your face to gauge your reaction regarding what we were seeing, and I would listen to your opinion like it was gospel. Every morning, when you showed up, I found strength, and when we left at night, I felt hope.*

*I never got the chance to say goodbye to officer Roland Taverner, but I got to watch as that man who couldn't forgive himself for wounding a manufactured hero found release in becoming a genuine hero himself.*

*Once you reunited the Taverners, you could have left that truck, but you didn't.*

*I'm sorry that you weren't able to meet Roland until it was too late to have a conversation with him, but I'm so damn proud of what you accomplished with him by your side.*

*It was only through careful attention, and selfless action that we were able to change the future, and now, this isn't the end.*

*I hope that everyone we saved understands that without reaching out to each other, compulsively, habitually, they most certainly will find that, one day, a hole in the sky will destroy the planet.*

*LA is a place where people arrive with dreams, or a screenplay, or a need to forget a trauma. Somewhere toward the end of your trip to LA, I think we both finally understood we had a part in saving the world, and we played that role perfectly.*

*This is how the world continues:*

*Tommy Eliot will win the primary, then the election, and he'll dedicate his win to the memory of Bobby Frost.*

*General Teena MacArthur will shut down Utopia 3.*

*The government will destroy the records of Serpentine Dream Theory.*

*Boxer will meet the man tattooed on his back.*

*I will be remembered as a hero.*

*And you will be forgotten.*

*Most importantly, the Earth will continue to spin, as long as we don't kill it, because the Earth is a pimp, and pimps don't commit suicide.*



# RESOURCES

**TO GIVE TO A FANTASTIC VETERAN'S CHARITY, THE AUTHORS RECOMMEND:**

<https://support.woundedwarriorproject.org/>  
<https://www.garysinisefoundation.org/donate>  
<https://www.fisherhouse.org>  
<https://www.operationhomefront.org/donate>  
<https://semperfifund.org>

**TO READ A FREE COPY OF THE BIBLE:**

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/rhe>

**IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, PLEASE CALL:**

800-273-8255

The world needs you to help; the world is here to help.  
Reach out, shake hands, forgive... let's close the dark rift, together.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## T/JAMES REAGAN

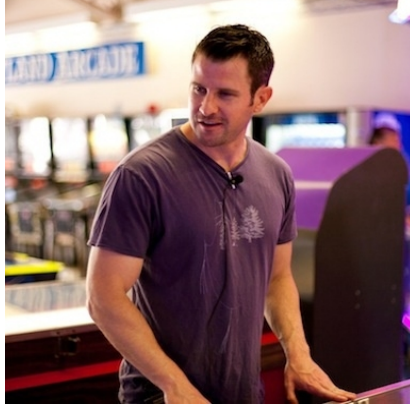
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